THE VICARIOUS YEARS

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JOHN VAN DRUTEN

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by

JOHN VAN DRUTEN



WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD
MELBOURNE :: LONDON :: TORONTO

FIRST PUBLISHED 1915

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
AT THE WINDMILL PRESS
KINGSWOOD, SURREY

THERE WAS ONCE A BOY named Teddy Attridge, who was born in London more than fifty years ago. There is now a man named Edward Attridge, who lives in Connecticut and is the author of a number of fairly successful books and plays. It took a long series of events to turn the one person into the other. If I were to put down an account of those events, the result would be an autobiography. But that is not what I am setting out to write. This is a voyage of discovery on which I am embarking, an exploration of that portion of my life which, as I look back on it, seems to have been lived almost exclusively at second-hand. Those were the years when nothing seemed to happen to me, but when the things that happened to the people by whom I was surrounded were of the most intense importance to me; when those were the things, in fact, of which my whole life was composed.

That, I suppose, is true of the childhood of almost everyone, except those who from their earliest years are flung into a world of personal struggle and adventure, and its truth extends into the period known as adolescence. When this section of a life is handled in fiction, it ends usually with the first major disillusionment, most frequently resulting from a love affair. The hero is unhappy, but one is left to assume that he has also now grown up. In my own case, those years, the vicarious ones, seem to have lasted longer than is usual. I am not sure, even yet, just when they ended, or what ended them. That is what I want to find out. That is why I am writing this book, and why I have called it a voyage of discovery.

But the voyage cannot be made from the standpoint of to-day. The 'I' who is writing these words now had

no existence in those days except as the figure that Teddy Attridge could not visualise, but hoped and dreamed that one day he himself might become. It is Teddy who must make the journey in his own person, and it is to him that I must return, setting my present self aside: to Teddy Attridge and the people—the four or five leading characters—who composed the world of his experience and admiration. The first that he could remember were Oliver and Joanna.

Chapter One

(1)

OLIVER AND JOANNA WERE MY COUSINS. They lived in Hampstead, as we did, but their house was nicer than ours: bigger and newer, and in a pleasanter road. Their garden was twice as large as ours was, with room for a full-sized tennis court; they had a conservatory and a pianola, and there were double doors to their dining-room. When I had Sunday dinner there, there was cut-glass on the table, and a red cut-glass sugar bowl which their father once teased me into believing held pink sugar. And at tea, sometimes, there were Jumbles—those toffee-like, gingersnap horns, filled with whipped cream, which, at home, were occasionally served as a sweet at Mother's best dinner parties, with one put aside and saved for me next day.

I was never sure of the correct name for our relationship. Cousin Sophie was my mother's first cousin, and Mother told me that that made Cousin Sophie my second cousin, and Oliver and Joanna my third cousins. But Oliver said that his mother was my first cousin once removed, and that he and Joanna were my second cousins. A governess of theirs confused things more by talking about 'cousins german'. It was a little like the problem of 'brothers and sisters have I none, but this man's father is my father's son', which Joanna, when quite small, used to try and work out with the salt, pepper and mustard pots on the dinner-table.

Many years later, and after Cousin Sophie had died, my mother told me a story which explained a good deal in the relationship of our two families. Cousin Ben, who was Oliver's and Joanna's father, had proposed to my mother first. She refused him, and told her cousin, Sophie, who was her best friend at that time, all about it. Soon afterwards, Mother and Father became engaged, and within a week Sophie was engaged to Ben.

"Did she ever say anything about it?" I asked.

"She never mentioned it. Naturally," my mother answered. "But I don't think she can have forgotten. You're not to tell Oliver and Joanna," she added quickly.

The caution of her afterthought was due to the fact that I almost always told Oliver and Joanna everything, including things I heard from the maids, things that I should have kept to myself. My mother had had trouble with me over that habit, several times. A few years earlier I would probably have passed this story on, too, but by then even I was able to realise that it was something not to be told to anyone about his mother—that she had been a second-best to one's own. I never did tell Oliver and Joanna, much and often as I wanted to, and I found a kind of suffocating pride in being able to keep the secret. It seemed, as I thought about it, more and more to account for the sense of strain of which I had always been half aware in our parents' attitudes towards each other. Whenever my father spoke of Ben Winter, there was an edge and curl to his voice. I came to know later that Cousin Ben was not a likeable person, but after my mother's revelation it seemed to me that my father might have been jealous of him for having proposed first. Perhaps he thought him still in love with my mother. Whether Cousin Ben spoke similarly of my father, I never knew, but he probably resented him for knowing of his rejection.

Yet the two families could not keep away from each other, and as I grew up it seemed to me that I could see a thread of emulation running through their lives that repeated itself, later, in my own relationship with Oliver. The birth of my elder brother, a year after my parents' marriage, must have been a source of bitterness to the Winters, who had no children for eight years. Oliver, their first child, was born a month before me, and the two pregnancies must have had about them something of the quality of a race.

Our parents dropped in on each other sometimes in the evenings, always taking care to telephone first, and they entertained each other periodically at dinner, although they were apt to leave their better friends out of the dinner parties, or to produce them only rarely and by way of showing them off. Mother and Cousin Sophie used to meet on their morning shopping expeditions, and occasionally would lunch and go to a matinée with what must have been a stifled and unadmitted regret for the days when they had been like Hermia and Helena, doing everything together. But wifely loyalty to their husbands' mutual mistrust kept them from ever recapturing the old degree of friendship. The best that they could do was to be superficially amiable with each other, and to allow their children to be as friendly as possible, without ever seeming to encourage them. It was another example of the odd pull of the relationship that Cousin Sophie should have engaged the younger sister of our nurse to look after Oliver when he was born. Our nurses being sisters, it was inevitable that we should take our walks together, just as our living in the same neighbourhood sent Oliver and me to the same kindergarten. Our fathers could not blame our mothers for it.

Because we were of an age and went through more than twenty years of our lives together, it was hard, afterwards,

for me to remember Oliver as a child. He persisted in walking through the pictures of my childhood, looking as I knew him at the moment from which I was engaged in gazing back. I could see him only as I had seen him that same day: lanky, with straw-like hair on his long, large head, too big, even, for his tall body, his light eyes either dancing with an amusement that was cynical and mocking at something or someone, probably myself, or else cold and blank with a contemptuous disapproval, again probably of me. The same disapproval curled his lips. When did those expressions come upon his face? It seemed to me that the small boy, walking with me beside his little sister's perambulator, must have worn them, too. There was no way, it seemed, of knowing what people were really like when one first encountered them, the people whom one later came to know so well. Memory and present knowledge merged into each other; one could not tell which was which. Only isolated moments, sentences, remained as clues; but there might be other ones which, if recaptured, could tell something very different.

I was always a little afraid of Oliver, of his scorn, disapproval or disinterest. He acquired much younger than most children the faculty of discrimination; realised much earlier than most that it was possible to dislike people, not as one disliked the unjust or the derisive master at school, but critically, as one judges in later life. He learned very young the tricks of irony and sarcasm, and there was no time when he could not make me feel small with a word or a look. With other children I was used to say, with confidence: "Can I tell you a story?" when we went for walks and I felt myself brimming over, as I almost always did. With Oliver I had to wait and watch, as one watches an ill-tempered person for signs of approachability, and even when his mood seemed bland

and propitious, I would still fear his answer of: "If you must," or, as he once said: "Is it one you've thought out, or are you just going to make it up as you go along?" It was this question which finally discouraged me from telling stories to Oliver at all. I could not think them out in advance; if I tried, I no longer enjoyed telling them; all that I wanted was to be allowed to spill a stream of characters and details concerning them, what they ate and what they wore; any attempt to plan what was to happen to them fretted me and made the telling seem like work. Oliver's comments, when he was willing to listen at all, were glacially logical, freezing my invention. You cannot write for a reader of whom you are afraid, and it was a relief when Joanna, two years his junior, grew old enough to listen to me, and to say to Oliver when the three of us took walks together: "All right, if you don't want to listen, you can walk ahead by yourself. I want to hear." On these occasions Oliver not only walked ahead, but frequently went off entirely on his own, taking a different direction, and almost always returned to give the impression that he had had some adventure, seen some sight or derived some inner satisfaction from his walk, better than we could possibly have found in ours. Sometimes he would tell us things that he had seen, remarks that he had overheard. It was only later that I began to wonder whether they were true.

We had little in common in the way of interests. We both admired the Sherlock Holmes stories and the historical novels of Harrison Ainsworth, and thought ourselves advanced and discriminating in preferring them to the school stories and adventure tales that were considered suitable to our years. But apart from those, almost all our tastes were disparate. Oliver liked cricket, especially County Cricket, which bored me acutely. He knew the names and the batting and bowling averages of

all the cricketers, as I was beginning to know the records of the actors and actresses of the London stage. Oliver scorned my interest in the theatre, but I dared not—for a while, at any rate—scorn his love of cricket. His parents, when I went to their house, gave me to understand that it was a far more suitable preoccupation for a boy than the theatre, and I had not yet the courage of my tastes. As a result, I went with Oliver to Lord's or to the Oval, sitting through matches that were excruciating wastes of boredom to me, rather than stay at home, missing something which, even though I could not enjoy it, I had been made to feel was the right thing for me to enjoy.

It was the same with Oliver's interest in music. I had cried over my piano lessons and my practising until I was allowed to abandon them. I could not sing in tune, and was laughed at when I tried. Yet when Oliver was discovered to be slightly musical, when he began to talk knowledgeably about sonatas and concertos with their key signatures, and to play Chopin Preludes and Mazurkas on the piano, I affected a similar interest. I went with him to concerts, mostly piano recitals, and again fought boredom, feeling that in doing so I was entering a world of the elect, because I was sharing something that Oliver enjoyed. He was always able to make me feel that his pleasures, like his possessions, were finer, more desirable, more altogether admirable than my own, very much in the manner of modern advertising which is designed to make the reader ashamed of his own tastes and snobbishly feel that it is his duty to desire something that in his heart he does not want at all.

The same was true of his friendships, both at school and outside it. If he chummed up with a boy whom I had not previously thought either interesting or attractive, he could make that boy seem suddenly the most desirable person in the school. If he came back from a summer

holiday and told me of people he had met in the hotel, I was convinced that they were fascinating beyond any that I might have encountered in the Hydro to which we had been. The supreme example of this was the Carlill girls.

(2)

As with the Winters, so, too, there was no time in my life when I could not remember the Carlills, but in the beginning they were minor characters only, belonging in Oliver's life rather than in mine. Mr. Carlill was a friend of Cousin Ben's; his first name was Monty, and he was a stockbroker, fat, flushed in the face, with a lot of fair hair and a hearty laugh. Later, I suspected that he drank too much. But as a child I saw him very seldom, on occasional Sunday afternoons when I was having tea at Oliver's and the Carlills came to call. The Carlills meant Mr. and Mrs., and their three daughters, Lily and Rita and Rose. Mrs. Carlill almost always wore black velvet, with a good deal of lace, Parma violets, white kid gloves and a big, black hat with ostrich feathers.

Just as the Winters were richer than we were, so the Carlills were richer than they were, and were a part of the glamour that surrounded them. When I was taken to the pantomime, we went to the Upper Circle; Oliver and Joanna went to the Dress Circle; but when the Carlills went to the theatre, they always sat in the stalls. The Winters had a pianola, but the Carlills had an Electrophone. This was an attachment, connected with the telephone, by which one was able to listen to performances in a certain number of West End theatres. I was told that Lily Carlill had heard *The Merry Widow* twenty-seven times.

My parents did not like the Carlills. They thought

them common, and met them only at occasional dinner parties, so that my knowledge of the girls was based almost entirely on hearsay, on the things that Oliver and Joanna told me about them. But I treasured every detail. Lily, the eldest, was tall and fair and spreading. Once, when Oliver and I were on a bus, going to the West End, he pointed to Jay's at the top of Regent Street, and told me that that was where Lily got her dresses. They gave her an upholstered look. My mother said that Jay's was a very expensive shop. I heard about Lily's singing, too, and knew the contents of her repertoire. Her star pieces were 'The Three Fishers' and a sentimental ballad called 'Dear Faded Rose'. My mother heard her sing once after dinner at the Winters', and when I asked her what Lily's voice was like, she replied: "Very low," a comment which I did not then recognise as a criticism.

Rita, the second daughter, was slighter and dark-haired, with almond eyes and a good deal of vivacity. She was keen on writing and the theatre, and had a school-friend who had once walked on in a play at His Majesty's. I hoped always to be allowed to meet the friend, but I never did. Her mere existence, however, made Rita romantic to me. Rose, the youngest girl, had a wonderful dolls' house with bedroom wardrobes that contained real electric lights that switched on and off when the wardrobes opened and shut. Later, when Rose outgrew it, the dolls' house was given to Joanna, but by that time, which was when I came to see it, the lights were broken. There was talk of having them repaired, but Joanna did not care enough for dolls for it to be worth while.

When I was about ten, the three girls had their picture in the Academy. Oliver and Joanna were taken to see it in the artist's studio, and I can remember its reproduction in one of the illustrated magazines. Lily and Rita wore evening dresses: Lily had a tulle cloud around her large

shoulders, and Rita wore something sparkling in her hair. They had their arms about each other's waists, and were smiling down at Rose, who had a Pekingese dog in her arms. My parents and my brother saw the picture at the exhibition, and my brother came home singing:

"Lily and Rita and Rose
Would look better without any clothes",

which shocked me, but also made me giggle. I repeated it to Oliver, who looked at me contemptuously.

"That isn't funny," he said.

"Why isn't it?" I threw back.

"Because it's vulgar and silly."

After a moment, I decided that he was right.

It must have been soon after that that I was taken with Oliver and Joanna to spend a Sunday at a house which the Carlills had taken for the summer in the country, near Berkhamsted. It remained as an enchanted day in my memory. The downstairs rooms of the house, full of bright chintz, had large french windows opening on to a terrace, exactly as I had seen them in pictures of stage sets. On the piano, in a silver frame, was the photograph of a busty contralto who was appearing that year at Hammerstein's newly opened London Opera House. I had heard her name from my parents. The photograph showed her in the costume of Dalila, and was inscribed in an enormous handwriting to 'Ma chère Lily'. There was a cabinet gramophone in polished wood. Our machine at home had a red tin horn. There were records by Melba and Caruso, and one of the Sextet from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which Oliver told me cost two pounds ten.

In the grounds there was a lake, spanned by a rustic bridge, with water-lilies and a boat, and beyond it a dark, tangled patch which Rose called 'the wilderness'. I

walked in it after lunch with Joanna, telling her stories, until we came across a dead bird, and she ran away. Back in the garden I found Oliver watching the tennis. Some bright and gay people were playing.

"They aren't very good," Oliver whispered to me.

I stayed beside him for a while, and then remembered a row of magazines and illustrated papers that I had seen lying on a big table in the drawing-room. I knew that these always contained photographs of plays, and I stole back to the house to look at them. The drawing-room was empty, cool and shady. I took one of the papers and sat down in an arm-chair, with my back to the window, gloating over the pictures. Then, suddenly, I heard Rita's voice from behind me.

"And what are you so interested in, Teddy Attridge?" she asked gaily.

I started guiltily.

"Nothing," I said, closing the *Tatler* quickly.

"What was it?" She came over to me. "What were you looking at?"

"Oh, just some pictures of a play." I tried to be airy about it.

"What play?"

"*The Quaker Girl.*"

"I've seen that four times."

"Have you?" I was thrilled.

"Let me see the pictures."

She sat on the arm of my chair as I reopened the paper. She began to explain the scenes to me.

"That's where he is teaching the Quaker Girl to dance. That's where the Prince sings 'Come to the Ball'. Have you heard the music?"

"Some of it."

"Would you like me to play you some of it on the piano?"

"Oh, I would."

She went to the piano and began to play, describing how the songs fitted into the story.

"You see, she's a Quaker. You know what that is, don't you?"

I nodded.

"They say 'me and thee'," I answered.

"She's been brought up very strictly. And she sings about it."

Rita began to sing:

"And the days are very sad, and the world is very grey,
And there's not a Quaker lad who will come to me and say:"

A man's voice, in the open french window, joined in:

"Me loves thee, and thee loves me,
None to woo a maiden and take her. . . ."

Rita looked up, smiling, at the man in blazer and tennis flannels who stood there, and then sang the next lines to him, answeringly, acting them with a mock-pathetic pout, flirtatiously, and yet as though they were doing the scene from the play together.

"Nobody seems to care about me,
Life is very dull for a Quaker."

They both laughed, and he came and sat beside her on the piano bench. She swung into the gayer tune of 'Tony from America', and this time they sang together. Some of the tennis players drifted in, and soon there was a group around the piano. Rita stopped when she saw one of the men, and got up quickly.

"Here's Bertie," she cried. "You come and play for us, Bertie." She came and stood by me. "Bertie's wonderful," she said. "He can play anything he's ever heard. What shall we ask him to play?"

"Could he play *The Chocolate Soldier*?" I asked timidly.

The *Chocolate Soldier* waltz was my favourite tune. Its dreamy, soaring melody seemed to me as delicious as my favourite pudding, chocolate blancmange and cream, of which the association in the name also reminded me. The man at the piano played it; then he played tunes from *The Dollar Princess* and *A Waltz Dream*. For half an hour I was happier than I had ever been in my life. I even forgot self-consciousness for a few moments and joined in the singing, until I looked around and saw Oliver making faces at me and putting his fingers in his ears. I turned my back on him, but I stopped singing and my pleasure was spoiled. Presently I went over to him.

"Don't you wish you could play like that?" I asked, not wholly without malice, to revenge myself on him.

"No, I don't," he replied. "He's playing by ear. That's not playing the piano."

"What do you mean?" I asked hotly.

"You wouldn't understand," he said loftily. "But any musician would. No real musician ever plays by ear."

He turned away, and took a book from the shelf, settling into the arm-chair I had vacated, and deliberately cutting himself off from the music and the rest of the room.

Presently we had tea on the lawn, with strawberries and cream. A man came and sat down next to me.

"I heard you singing just now," he said.

I flushed.

"I can't sing," I muttered.

"Oh, don't say that. I thought it was very nice. Not quite the tune that the composer wrote, perhaps . . ."

I pushed my plate away from me.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I don't want any more." I started to get up.

"Oh, look." He put his hand on my arm. "Don't be cross. I was only teasing you."

"That hasn't anything to do with it," I said.

"No, I know. But if you go away, and don't finish your strawberries, everyone will think it has, and they'll think it's my fault, and they won't ask me here again. And I want to be asked again, very much. So please have some more." He pushed my plate at me. "You haven't got enough cream there. Do you like cream?" I nodded, beginning to be mollified. "Well, then." He took the cream jug and flooded my plate from it. "That's better," he said, as I began to eat again.

By the time he had given me some more strawberries to finish the cream with, and then some more cream to finish the strawberries with, I was happy again. He was a dark-haired man with a small moustache, and very handsome. The others called him Kenneth. After tea, we all picked armfuls of sweet peas from around the tennis court to take home with us, and went to see the grapes and peaches in the hot-houses. The man called Kenneth beckoned me to stay behind after the others had left. He picked a peach and gave it to me. "You'd better eat it here," he said. "I'm sorry there's no cream." We had supper at a long refectory table; I had never eaten before at a table without a cloth on it. There was cold salmon, and the grown-ups drank something called 'Cup', that had fruit in it, while Oliver and Joanna and I were given home-made lemonade from a tall jug. Mr. Carlill gave Oliver and me some 'Cup' to try. I did not like the taste, but Oliver did, draining his glass and wanting more.

"Oliver asks for more," Lily cried gaily, from across the table. "It's like Oliver Twist. 'Oliver Asks For More.' "

Oliver smiled, conveying the impression that he had known what he was doing, and had asked for more only by way of quotation. The incipient laugh against him turned to admiration.

It was after nine when we left, and there were long shadows slanted across the fields, gold in the evening sunlight, that we saw from the train windows. Joanna went to sleep, huddled against her mother. I sat opposite them, clutching the copy of the *Tatler* that contained the pictures of *The Quaker Girl*. Rita had given it to me just as we were leaving, picking it up from the table and saying: "Wouldn't you like to take this home with you?" It was a wonderful present, and I loved her for giving it to me. Oh, why weren't the Carlills *our* friends? Would they ever ask me to their house again, I wondered?

They never did, but the day remained a magic one to me, becoming the background for many stories in which the characters lived in just such houses, and behaved as the people that day had done. The man called Kenneth was the hero of several of them, with Rita as the heroine. Then I heard that Kenneth and Lily were going to be married, and could not understand his preference. They were married at St. George's, Hanover Square, and Joanna was a bridesmaid. There was a picture of Lily, wearing a veil of Chantilly lace that was supposed to have belonged to the Empress Eugènie, among the 'Brides of the Week' in the *Bystander*. In the evening after the wedding the Carlills gave a dinner party in a restaurant, to which Oliver and Joanna were allowed to go. Oliver described the entire menu to me afterwards. They had wild duck, served in a flaming sauce that was made at a side-table. After dinner they went to the Palace, where Grace La Rue sang: 'You Made Me Love You, I Didn't Want To Do It'. I thought it a pity that they should have gone to a music-hall instead of a proper theatre, but Oliver

told me that they did not leave the restaurant until nearly ten o'clock, so that they missed a great deal of the programme. That staggered me; I could not imagine anyone missing a single moment of a theatre, if they could help it. After the performance the grown-ups went on to supper somewhere, but Oliver and Joanna were taken home by their father. It was twelve o'clock when they got to bed. Again I thought how bitterly unfair it was that my parents did not have friends like that. At that time I had never been to a theatre in the evening. I envied Oliver and Joanna, and almost hated them.

Chapter Two

(1)

OLIVER AND I WERE GOING TO THE BIG DAY-SCHOOL in Hampstead, but we saw little of each other there. Although we entered at the same time, we were placed in different divisions of the same form. The classes being large, all forms were divided into A and B, and if you started in an 'A' form, as I did, you remained in the 'A's throughout your school career. This meant that for the next six years Oliver and I lived parallel lives during most of our school hours. Even in the O.T.C., we were not in the same platoon. We had different friends and, since we went to different masters for our classes, we could seldom share the same likings, jokes and hatreds which are the bases of school friendships.

Not only our circumstances, but our characters, too, determined and differentiated our school experiences for us. Oliver, I think, liked school; I hated it. Oliver was adaptable, able to assume with the other boys a man-of-the-world camaraderie which brought him popularity. His gift of sarcasm, which made me uncomfortable with him, secured him freedom from bullying; he had a certain flexibility of moral code, outwardly at any rate, in regard to such things as cheating and lying to masters, and a habit of never doing brilliantly, though he did well, in work and games that saved him from suspicion of superiority. It was only later, years later, that he confessed to me how much of all this was assumed, deliberately and as part of a policy.

I, on the other hand, was egocentric, over-sensitive, and over-scrupulous of conscience. I was bullied, and regarded as a prig. In the subjects that I cared about, such as English, French and History, I was too good, earning the reputation of a 'swot', which even my hopelessness in science and mathematics could not mitigate; while I was so bad at all games and so stupid in platoon drill as to make myself a butt. In neither the things that I could do, nor the things that I could not, was I able to avoid extremes; and extremes do not make for popularity in school life.

Outside of the gates, however, my friendship with Oliver stayed intact. We met on our way to school each morning, and walked part of the way home together each afternoon. We spent our week-ends in each other's company. At school we were Winter and Attridge; outside it we reverted to Oliver and Teddy, with very different personalities from the ones we wore with our surnames. We read books and discussed them together; we began to discover sex. Here, too, Oliver displayed a dual attitude which, if I had had any perspicacity, should have told me how much of his behaviour before others was consciously assumed for effect, either impressive or protective. To the boys at school, he paraded an almost bored acquaintance with the facts of life which, I came to know later, masked a kind of fastidious, nervous shrinking that made itself apparent in the solemnity and euphemism that he employed in discussing sexual matters with me. Yet it was from him that I learned most of what I knew. It was he who told me of the physical difference between men and women, having seen his sister, Joanna, in her bath when she was tiny. But it was because of Lily Carlill that I learned most.

Within a year of her marriage I overheard elliptic conversation at the Winters', hastily hushed before us

children, and echoes of it at the dinner-table at home, to the effect that Lily was divorcing her husband. When I asked for details, they were denied me. Once, the word 'annulment' occurred, but it suggested to my ears no more than the matrimonial troubles of Henry the Eighth, and Papal Intervention. It was Oliver who told me on one of our walks, and in a veiled and lowered voice, that Kenneth Barker had never been a proper husband to Lily.

"Their marriage," he said solemnly, "was never consummated."

"What do you mean?"

"They were never really married."

"But you went to their wedding." I had no idea what he was trying to say.

"I don't mean that."

"What do you mean, then?"

"Well, you know what people do when they're married? When they want children?"

"Yes." I did know that. He had told me himself, as though describing an obscure, mystic and very solemn rite.

"Well, it seems they never did. That he . . . couldn't."

"And can you get a divorce for that? Why?"

"Because that's the whole purpose of marriage. To produce young."

"Oh, like Napoleon and Josephine?"

"No," he said. "It isn't quite that. It was Josephine who couldn't have children, not Napoleon."

"Well, it's the same thing, isn't it, only the other way round?"

"Not . . . not quite. A woman can be unable to have children, but still be able to . . ." he hesitated, "do *that*," he finished.

"And can't a man? Do you mean every time a man does it, there must be a child?"

"N-no," he faltered again. "I don't think every time. But, you see, Kenneth couldn't do it at all."

"How do you know?"

"I heard my uncles talking about it."

"But how did *they* know? How did anyone know?"

"I don't know. I suppose Lily told someone."

"I can't imagine anyone telling about a thing like that. Any lady, anyway."

"I think she told her doctor. It's like a kind of illness he had."

"Oh, I see."

I pondered on this for a long time, secretly. After that talk Oliver seemed not to want to discuss it again, but I was intrigued with a curiosity that came near to prurience. I asked my brother about it, and was told merely that it was true, but that I had better not let my parents learn that I knew about it. When I pressed for further information, I was told that there wasn't any. It was later that I learned, again from Oliver, a darker side to the story. The revelation occurred on an evening soon after we had learned to smoke. We were walking together down one of the long, quiet Hampstead roads, where the street-lamps, shining through the trees, made an overhead tracery of light and lace. We had stopped at the corner tobacconist's to buy a packet of Nestors, and after we each had lighted one and walked in silence for a few minutes, Oliver said, hushed and heavily:

"If I tell you something, will you swear to keep it to yourself?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"No, but really swear. You won't tell anyone, not even your brother?"

"I swear. What's it about?"

"About Kenneth Barker. Lily's husband. You remember him?"

My mind went back to that day in the country, years ago, when he had given me strawberries and cream, and the peach in the hot-house. He had been an attractive figure then; lately he had become monstrous and tragic, like a man with some hidden, shameful secret.

"Yes, of course. What about him?"

Oliver took a long time to answer.

"Did you read in the paper the other day about that murder? In the wine-shop at Hendon? The soldier who killed a man because he made indecent overtures to him?"

"Yes."

"Well . . ." another long pause, and then very slowly and solemnly: "That might have been Kenneth Barker."

"What might?" I did not understand.

"The man who was murdered."

"Why? It was an old man, wasn't it? Kenneth Barker isn't old."

"I don't mean that. I don't mean the man could have been him. But I mean, he was like that."

"You mean——?" I was beginning to grasp it.

Oliver nodded.

"I mean, he was . . . vile," he said, picking out the word, icily. "That was why Lily divorced him. Why he never was able to . . . do anything with her. He liked . . . other men."

"How do you know?"

"My father told me."

"Your father?" This amazed me. My own father would never have mentioned such a thing.

"He was telling me about sex, and the dangers of school life. Warning me against them."

"School life?"

"Yes. Didn't you know that things like that happen at school? That there are boys who . . . do things with each other?"

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"Yes, that's why Plummer and Parsons were expelled."

"Well, that's what happens. If they're like that, then when they're grown up they can't have anything to do with women. It warps their whole lives."

"Why did he marry Lily, then?" I asked.

"I think it was for her money," he answered. "The Carlills are very rich."

"But . . . you go to prison for that sort of thing, don't you?" I went on. "Wasn't that why Oscar Wilde went to prison?"

"Yes."

"Did Kenneth Barker?"

"No. They got him out of the country. He went to Australia. They'd have put him in prison, if he hadn't. Mr. Carlill wanted to have him prosecuted, but Lily begged him not to."

"Did Lily know about it?" I asked in astonishment.

"Yes, of course she did."

"But I thought . . . I thought women didn't know about things like that."

"Well, I suppose she had to know, if she was married to him."

"How much *do* women know about sex?" I asked. "Nice women? I mean, ladies? I mean, about ordinary sex—men and women?"

"I don't know," Oliver said, reflectively. "I don't think they know much. I don't think they know anything till after they're married."

"You don't think they know what people *do*?"

He hedged a little.

"I think they know, sort of vaguely. I mean, I think they know there's *something* that happens. I don't think they really know what."

"There's something I don't understand," I said. "I don't understand how men and women *do*. I mean, I

don't understand how you . . . well, sort of *start*, with nice women. When you're married, for instance, and you want to do it with your wife, well, I mean—*how?* Can you imagine with . . . well, with Lily, for instance, or Rita?"

"I think, when you're in love, it just . . . happens," Oliver answered.

"I should have thought it would be worse if you were in love," I said. "I mean, I can see how you could do it with a prostitute, because she'd know that was what you wanted. But if you were in love with a woman, and she didn't know, it would seem . . . well, sort of dirty."

"It doesn't," said Oliver, pontifically, and then added: "Not if you want children."

"Don't you do it when you're married, *unless* you want children?" I asked.

"I don't think you're supposed to," he replied

That was the tenor of our conversations about sex when we were alone: grave, tentative and exploratory; making Oliver seem the more exasperatingly remote and double-faced when I saw him, a day or two later, on an O.T.C. Field Day, hobnobbing with a bunch of rowdies and swapping innuendoes with them, looking at me as though I were an intruding stranger when I hovered near them. Such talks between us were infrequent, products of his rare moods of relaxed watchfulness concerning the figure he was cutting. It is significant that they almost always took place in the half dark, when I could not see his face. And it was he who had to start them; if I tried to do so when he was disinclined, he gave me the coldest of brush-offs, leaving me to brood, sometimes for weeks on end, on the subject of myself.

And brood I did, especially after his revelation about Kenneth Barker, which disturbed me profoundly. How could so pleasing an exterior cover so loathsome a truth

within? I could not forget how pleasant he had seemed; it was impossible to conceive him now as a potential victim of murder, meriting murder, even. I could not believe in him as 'vile', but the word, in Oliver's clipped and melodramatic tone, rang in my ears. Surely, if people were vile, they ought to seem so; there ought to be some signs by which one could detect it. I thought again of normal sex, and the puzzle that that was to me. I looked at women around me, married women, and tried to imagine them indulging in sexual intercourse. It did not seem possible that they ever could have done so. My mother, for example. And if married women could look so innocent, so incapable of participating in what was still to me a dirty act, then every woman, whether married or not, was at least potentially the same. The stories that I could not help overhearing at school suggested that men and women were alike in sexual appetite, and that the satisfaction of that appetite was a form of prowess, and admirable. Could that be true? But what about the attitude of Society to fallen women--*The Scarlet Letter*, and all that? Did not that imply that sex in unmarried women was wrong and horrible, as wrong and horrible, almost, as Kenneth Larker's acts?

I was disturbed and I was frightened. It was not so much the facts of life that troubled me, as my not knowing what those facts were, or how I ought to feel about them. There was no one whom I could ask, whose judgment I could trust. If I turned to my brother about sex, he either evaded me or treated the matter as a joke, and Oliver's double standard baffled me. I wanted to know what was right, what was true, what was admirable; I wanted to be told what to respect and what to condemn; I had no way of knowing for myself. I had the same need in other matters—questions of religion or literary taste—but on those subjects I could turn to my parents or to

Oliver as arbiters and, if their judgments conflicted, could at least try and decide for myself which to believe. Usually I believed Oliver, and dismissed my parents' views as old-fashioned or undiscriminating. Oliver's generally disdainful bias towards life impressed me; if he admired anything, it must, I thought, be really good, and I could not afford to stand in his contempt by liking what he condemned. And both his admirations and his condemnations were always phrased so forcibly that it was hard for anyone as questioning as I was to resist them. There were never any half measures with Oliver. But on the question of sex he let me down, and badly.

(2)

Oliver still admired Rita Carlill. I had not seen her since the day in the country, but I had gone on hearing about her. Lily, once she was married, disappeared largely from the picture, but Rita stayed in the spotlight. I heard of her going to Tango teas, to the Russian Ballet, and to exhibitions of Post-Impressionist paintings. She went to St. Moritz for the winter sports, of which I had a mental picture derived from the coloured cover of a magazine. It showed a big circular ballroom, surrounded by huge windows, through which could be seen a deep sapphire sky, pierced with gold stars, and a number of very smooth, very conical, white towering peaks that looked like ice-cream. Inside the ballroom were diners at small tables, the men in white ties and the women with feather-brush ornaments in their hair. In the centre of the room a couple of skaters performed an exhibition waltz, both dressed in white, the girl-skater wearing an ermine toque. It looked very like the last act of a musical

comedy. When she was in London, Rita went ice-skating at Prince's, where she broke her ankle.

The Carlills were growing even richer. They moved from their house in Avenue Road to one in Mayfair, where they gave elaborate parties. They went to Hurlingham and Ranelagh. They bought a house on the river, near Henley, and invited the Winters down for the Regatta. Mr. Carlill, Oliver confided to me, was supposed to be keeping a chorus girl. (This bit of information started me worrying about sex all over again.) Rose Carlill had gone to finishing school in Switzerland. Then, suddenly, I learned that Rita was engaged, and one Sunday afternoon when I was at the Winters' she appeared with her fiancé at tea-time. His name was Cecil Champneys, and he had very tightly waved gold hair and a tiny gold moustache. His parents, Oliver told me, had a grouse moor in Scotland, and Rita was going up there for the twelfth. That was in 1914.

Then the Carlills lost their money. How, was never explained to me, but they gave up their big houses and went to live in an hotel. Actually it was little more than a glorified boarding-house in the Cromwell Road, but Oliver made even that sound romantic to me. I wished that we could live in an hotel. Rita's engagement came to an unexplained end, but instead of her importance dwindling with her parents' circumstances, it achieved even more glamour when I heard later that she had taken up journalism. This consisted of working for a paper called *The Lady In Waiting*, a weekly magazine with a rose and gold cover, traced over with a white lace pattern. Inside, there were fashion drawings of very tall, thin ladies with wide hats perched high and horizontal on their heads, and long fur stoles falling from their shoulders, one hand drooping, hidden, inside a muff. The advertisements had pictures of wasp-waisted and high-busted

women in corsets; actresses, smiling with rows of large, even teeth, in praise of 'Odol'; and heads of wonderfully arranged hair, all curls and clusters, recommending artists in transformations and postiches.

Among the features of the magazine were a Daily Difficulty, which propounded problems of etiquette and social discomfort, ending with the question: "What Should Mrs. A. Do?"; a double acrostic; a book corner; and a column of dramatic criticism, signed Claudia. Claudia also described the dresses of the plays that she reviewed in an adjacent column headed 'Frocks and Footlights'; it was this department that Rita now took over, going with Claudia to second nights. Now she was really connected with the theatre; now she had achieved real glamour for me.

The glamour that she had for Oliver sprang from a different source. In his childhood she had represented the rich, fashionable world to him; now she had a new attraction in a label that he had attached to her in his mind: a label bearing the adjective 'fast'. What a period word that was; it was almost impossible, by the 'twenties already, to explain or define it to a younger generation with the colour that it used to have for us. Employed by our mothers, Oliver's and mine, it carried disapproval, if not actual condemnation, of a disregard for reputation and convention; it had a hint of kisses in conservatories and taxis, although never in the modern sense of 'necking' —the kisses, one was to believe, unless the girl was a thoroughly bad lot, were always 'snatched', 'stolen', or permitted, rather than willingly bestowed or exchanged; it comprised excursions taken without chaperones; tea in a man's rooms; cigarette-smoking in public; and, this about 1916, evening dresses with shoulder straps.

But from Oliver, speaking of Rita and her like, 'fast' was a word with a thrill to it, importing mystery and

fascination, an enigmatic provocativeness, and a special kind of electricity in the atmosphere. For the most part, he did not even use the word itself at all, but translated it, jokingly and by way of mitigation, into literal French; telling me that she *un peu vite, tu sais*, the addition of the *tu sais* giving him a kind of rakishness himself. What was the origin of this impression concerning Rita, I was never sure, but I knew one incident which reinforced it. Rita told him a *risqué* story. It was the story of a young man who called on a lady and was told that she could not see him, because she was in the bath. He sent a message by her maid to tell her to slip on something, and come down. "So she slipped on the soap, and came down." We thought that daring then; and there was perhaps some ground for our thinking so, since it opened up vistas, or, rather, chink-like views, of nudity and, by implication, the effects of female nudity on men; and those were things which we were to believe were not generally spoken of, or even tacitly admitted, between men and women in our world.

That was the truth, although it was hard, no more than ten years later, to believe that it had been so; hard, too, by then, to think of anything that could still be described as *risqué*; the word and its synonyms—shocking, naughty or improper—seemed almost to have lost their meaning. By the 'thirties, at the latest, a story, a book or a play was either dirty or acceptable; there was no longer any half-way house. But in those days there were houses all along the road, until one reached the brothel, so to speak; and their existence added both spice and uncertainty of standard to our lives.

So Rita, on top of everything else, became *un peu vite*, and part of the thrill of this new label lay in its vagueness, in the fact that I was never quite sure how much latitude it covered. How far, exactly, would a girl go, if she were

fast? Did Oliver mean that she might really . . . well, 'go the whole hog'? Oliver jibbed at this question, his double standard probably bothering him as it did me, but he returned to the titillating assault on my curiosity after he had met her at a dance and sat out under some palms with her, by saying: "If I had had another dance, and played my cards right . . . *qui sait?*" The *qui sait?* lingered in my ears, teasing me and inflaming my imagination. If it did not mean what I thought it did, what else could it mean? Would a girl like Rita—*could* a girl like Rita—under any circumstances . . .? I left the question unfinished when I put it to Oliver, who understood it and refused to answer it, except by another *qui sait?* and a Gallic shrug of the shoulders, copied, I think, from Alice Delysia, whom we had seen in revues at the Ambassadors' and who carried daring innuendo, both of costume and of word, to its furthest possible limits in those days. Because of her label, and those hints of Oliver's, Rita became to me the real-life equivalent of what Delysia was on the stage. She was the phrase *qui sait?* personified for me.

Chapter Three

(1)

IN DEALING WITH RITA and the general attitude to fastness, I have gone ahead of myself by a couple of years.

It was early in the war years that Cousin Sophie died. In the few weeks of her illness she and my mother managed to recapture the friendship that had not been allowed to them since girlhood, and when she died I was startled by my mother's tears. They were my first encounter with grown-up emotion; they embarrassed me, but they thrilled me, too; I was, I felt, encountering drama for the first time in real life. I had never been particularly fond of Cousin Sophie; her death had no personal significance for me, and I was able to extract from its circumstances all that they held of novelty and excitement, without the smallest degree of participating emotion.

To begin with, when his mother was taken to a nursing home, Oliver came to stay with us, and remained for six weeks, while his sister, Joanna, was sent with an aunt to the country. I enjoyed having Oliver in the house sharing my bedroom, doing his homework at the same table with me, eating his breakfast and walking the whole way to school with me. No longer did our talks have to be broken off by the need for one of us to go home; they could be continued from bed to bed until someone from downstairs came and told us that it was time we went to sleep. I knew a closeness of companionship during those weeks that I had never had with anyone before.

It was I who answered the telephone call that brought the news of Cousin Sophie's death. It was early on a Saturday morning, soon after breakfast. Mother was upstairs, getting ready to go to the nursing home; Oliver was in the drawing-room, practising on the piano. The voice on the telephone was strange and muffled.

"Who's that?" it asked.

I gave our telephone number.

"Is that Teddy?"

"Yes," I said.

"Teddy, this is Cousin Ben. Is your mother there?"

"She's upstairs."

"Will you ask her to come to the telephone?"

I went to the foot of the stairs and called:

"Mother! Telephone!"

Mother appeared on the landing.

"Who is it?" she called back.

She came running down, faster than I had ever seen her run. Her face was tragic. I had not been told that Cousin Sophie was so ill, but I guessed now what had happened.

"Mother, is Cousin Sophie . . .?" I checked the word 'dead', only, I think, because I had read in books that that was the right thing to do.

"I don't know," she answered, and went into the morning-room. I started to follow her. "Stay out of here," she said sharply. "Shut the door."

I went into the hall, a little frightened by her tone. That was the only part of the incident that I did not like. A few minutes later she opened the door, looking for me.

"Come in here," she said. I went in. I could see that she had been crying. "Where's Oliver?" she asked. I told her. "I don't want you to see him this morning," she said.

Again I started my question.

"Is——?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Cousin Sophie's dead." Her mouth trembled, as though she were going to cry again, but she mastered it. "Cousin Ben is coming up here. *He'll* tell Oliver. I don't want you to see him until he has. I think perhaps you'd better go out."

"Out?"

"Go for a walk or something. You'd better not be in the house. Go along now."

I went upstairs to put on my boots very reluctantly. I did not want to miss the drama of Cousin Ben's arrival. I dawdled for a long time in the lavatory, trying to stall until he could get to the house. Presently I knocked at my mother's door.

"Who's there?"

"Me."

"What do you want? I thought I told you to go out."

"It's started to rain," I said.

There was a silence.

"Well, then, stay out of the way."

I went back to my bedroom, which looked on to the front, and sat at the window, watching. From downstairs I could hear the sound of a Debussy Arabesque. I began to picture a scene in a play. The curtain rises on a boy playing the piano. I thought it would be a good idea to make him play something gay, like a waltz or a musical comedy tune rather than Debussy, for the sake of the contrast. Then the door opens, and a man comes in. The boy jumps up. "Why, Father, what are you doing here?" "I've got something to tell you, my boy." "What is it?" "Come and sit down. Here, come and sit on my knee." He takes him on his knee, and gently breaks the news to him. "Your mother's dead. We're alone now, you and I." The last phrase wrote itself, rather to my surprise. It must have been an echo of something I had read. I

certainly could not imagine Cousin Ben saying it. I could not imagine him asking Oliver to sit on his knee, either, or Oliver doing so. I tried to picture what the scene between them would really be like, and failed. To help myself, prodding my imagination, I tried putting myself and my own father in their places. If Father had to break it to me that my mother had died, how would he tell me, how would I feel? By the time I had got through with it, I had worked myself up to crying a little. Then I saw that a taxi had stopped outside the house.

My mother must have been at her window, too, for she was on the stairs before the front door-bell had rung. I followed slowly, keeping a careful distance behind her, so that she should not know I was there, not going down to the bottom, but remaining just below the turn of the stairs, from which I could see into the hall. I saw the maid admit Cousin Ben; he threw his hat on the hall bench, and went towards my mother. Then suddenly, surprisingly, still wearing his overcoat, he took her in his arms and held her very close. When they separated, I could see that they were both crying. Then he took off his overcoat, and they went into the morning-room together. I sat down on the stairs, deeply impressed by the embrace that I had witnessed. I had seen people suffering. I was moved, but also I wanted to giggle; I did not know why. Then the piano-playing stopped, the drawing-room door opened, and Oliver came out. Suddenly I was frightened, seized with a panic such as an actor feels when he sees a fellow-player in a scene forgetting his lines, jumping into a later scene, or preparing to leave the stage before his cue. Oliver started up the stairs.

"What are you doing there?" he asked. I stared at him and could not answer. "What are you sitting on the stairs for?"

"I was listening to you playing." It was all I could think of to say. It sounded ridiculous.

He looked at me pityingly, and touched his forehead.

"Mad," he said. "Quite mad," and started on up the stairs.

"Don't go upstairs," I said. "Go back to the drawing-room."

"What for?"

Again I stared at him.

"Your father's here," I said at last.

"My father? Why?"

The drama had switched itself over to me, and now I did not like it so well.

"He wants to talk to you," I said weakly.

He looked at me searchingly.

"Is my mother dead?" he asked, without any expression in his voice at all.

I had an idea that news of that kind always had to be broken gently.

"I think she's very ill," I answered.

"She's been very ill all this time," he said, coldly. Then he turned, went back down the stairs and into the drawing-room again. After a moment, I heard the piano-playing resumed, exactly as before. I was puzzled and amazed. Then the morning-room door opened, and Cousin Ben came out. I scuttled back up the stairs. Leaning over the banisters, I could see him go into the drawing-room. The piano stopped again. I went to the study. Presently Oliver came in. I looked at him for traces of tears, and could see none.

"I'm going home," he said. "Thank you for a nice time."

It was exactly as if he had been to tea.

"I'll see you at school on Monday," he said, and then,

turning at the door, added quietly: "The funeral's on Tuesday," and went out.

I could not understand him. I suspected that he was acting, that his indifference was assumed to impress me, but I could not be sure. In any case, I was impressed, and I was impressed, too, by his behaviour at the funeral, walking beside his father, looking grave but slightly contemptuous of the whole proceeding. Joanna, when I saw her, was smudged with days of weeping.

We stayed away from school the whole day of the funeral. In the afternoon we went for a walk.

"It's too bad there aren't any Tuesday matinees," Oliver said.

"Oh, but we couldn't go to a matinée to-day."

"Why not?" he demanded.

"The day of your mother's funeral?"

"It wouldn't make any difference to *her*," he said briefly.

"Do you *feel* like going to a matinée?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so. If there were anything decent to go to."

Again I asked myself if this were genuine, or done to impress me.

"You think I don't feel anything," he said, later in the afternoon, when it had begun to grow dark. "Don't you? That my mother's dying doesn't mean anything to me? You think I'm callous." I could not answer. "I'm not callous, but I hate scenes. I don't think I'd make a scene even if anyone tortured me."

"Then you do care?" I said.

"Yes, of course I care. I loved my mother very much. She was a very good woman. And a very intelligent one. My father worshipped her passionately. It's him I'm sorry for. He'll be utterly bereft without her."

Here was drama again, a picture of Cousin Ben as the

bereft widower, for me to gloat over later by myself.

"Do you believe in an after-life?" I asked.

"No," he said shortly.

"What do you believe happens when people die?"

"Nothing at all."

"You don't believe they . . . go on?"

"No, of course I don't. How could they? All that's left of my mother is in the coffin that we saw put into the ground this morning. You know what happens to a body after it is dead, don't you? It decomposes, and the worms eat it. Well, that's what will happen to my mother."

I was horrified.

"How can you talk like that?" I asked.

"Why not? It's the truth. I wouldn't say it to my father. He's too cut up. He couldn't face the truth. But he knows it perfectly well. I don't need lies to comfort me."

"I don't believe it," I said passionately. "I don't believe that that's all."

"You mean, you don't want to believe it," he replied. "That's not the same thing."

"Don't you believe people have souls?"

"No, I don't. Not what you mean by a soul. My mother's soul was her kindness. She did kind acts. But she isn't there to do them any more. What do *you* think she's doing now? Sitting on a cloud and playing a harp?"

"No, of course not. But she must be somewhere."

"Where?"

"I don't know where, but somewhere. Something of her must be somewhere. Otherwise . . ."

"Otherwise what?" he challenged me.

"Otherwise . . . well, otherwise . . . what's the point of it all?"

"There isn't any point," he said. "My mother existed

because her parents performed a certain act together nearly fifty years ago. She was the result of that act. Then she met my father, and they performed the same act, and Joanna and I are the result."

("They must have performed it twice," I thought, but did not say.)

"By producing children, she fulfilled her natural function," he continued. "Then she died. That's all there is to it."

"I don't believe it," I said again. "There *must* be more to it than that. Don't you believe in God?"

"No. Do you?"

"Yes." Then I qualified my answer. "I think I do."

"What sort of God?"

"I don't know, exactly. But a God who . . . well . . . made everything."

"Made this war, and lets it go on?"

"No, but . . ."

"Made my mother suffer agonising pain, and then killed her as a merciful release, making my father suffer, leaving Joanna and me as orphans? I don't think much of your God, if that's the kind of thing He does."

I could not answer this, and switched my tack.

"If there isn't a God, if there isn't anything hereafter," I said, "why should your mother have been a good woman, and a kind one?"

"Well, certainly not because she expected a God to reward her for it, if that's what you mean. My mother didn't believe in God, either, even though she did teach us to say our prayers when we were small."

"Why did she?"

"Because it was supposed to be the right thing to do, like teaching children to believe in Father Christmas. But she knew it wasn't true. She was good and kind because she was a fine person, and because her parents had brought

her up to be. Because *they* were good people. And she married my father because he was a good man and a fine man. But it certainly hadn't anything to do with God. Which do you think is the better person—the man or woman who is good because they think God will punish them if they're not, or the one who's good because it's their nature? It was my mother's nature to be good, that's all."

We had returned now to Oliver's house, and I left him there, walking home alone, going over our conversation in my mind, and, as was usual with everything that Oliver said, if he was dogmatic enough about it, trying to take it all as gospel. What he had said about God and the hereafter was disturbing. Like Oliver, I had not been brought up to any religious belief beyond saying my prayers when I was little. I occasionally said them still, though I had refrained from doing so while he was staying with me and sharing my room, because I had feared his comments. But my saying them at all sprang from no real conviction, and I was aware that I only did so when I wanted something, or after I had done wrong and was afraid of God's anger. I realised that they had never been very efficacious in getting me the things I wanted, but it was the anger part that still worried me. If Oliver were wrong and there was a God, He would be very angry with me for believing Oliver. I thought I had better go on believing in Him for a while. The question of survival after death was different. It was certainly easier and more sensible to think of fat, comfortable Cousin Sophie as having finished, than to try and imagine details of her continuance in some disembodied state. But if I were not going to believe in the hereafter, where was the sense in my continuing to believe in God? Didn't they go hand in hand? It was here that I began to grow confused, deciding to drop the subject and play safe; to go on

believing in God, anyway; it couldn't do any harm, and it didn't, actually, seem to me to matter very much.

What concerned me far more in our talk was Oliver's picture of his parents, because that was related to real life. I had never thought of Cousin Sophie as either a very good woman or a very intelligent one. I had accepted her as quite ordinary. Nor had I thought of Cousin Ben as worshipping her passionately. This new view of them was astonishing; it made me feel very stupid for not having been aware of it; it made me see not only them, but Oliver, differently, and gave me a new respect for him and his sensitivity. Were my own parents, I wondered, equally interesting? I could not think so, and again it seemed to me that he was better off than I; better off in having such fine parents, and in having the capacity to appreciate them.

(2)

Before a year was over, Cousin Ben had married again. He married a widow called Mrs. Davis, who was fair and tall and pallidly pretty. She was about thirty-five, and her first name was Thelma. I heard the news from Oliver, who announced it in a typically casual way, inserting it as a parenthesis into a sentence about something else, as though it were of trivial importance. It staggered me.

"Your father's marrying again?" I said, aghast.

"What's so surprising about that?"

"But I thought . . ."

"What?"

"I thought he . . . he loved your mother so much."

"So he did. But that's no reason why he should spend the rest of his life mourning. Besides, my father's still quite a young man, comparatively. He probably needs a woman."

Oh, why did Oliver always have to be so cold-blooded

about everything, especially everything about which I showed the least tendency to get dramatic or emotional?

"Do you like her?" I asked.

"Yes, very much. She's very nice."

There was a slight twinkle in his eyes as he said this. I knew then that he knew I had been hoping he would say that he didn't, and that he was taking pleasure in dashing my hopes. A little later, however, he did concede something to my desire to make a situation out of it.

"Joanna doesn't like her at all. She's very upset about it," he said.

"Why doesn't she like her?"

"I don't know. Why don't people like each other? As a matter of fact, I think it's probably because she's like you, and always takes the sentimental view of things. Besides, she's a woman, and she's only fifteen. She can't understand the . . . well, the biological side of it. She was very devoted to our mother, and, to her, it's . . . well, just as if Father was being unfaithful. I've tried to explain it to her, but she won't see it."

My mother, I found, looked at it in much the same way as Joanna, resenting the marriage, though she tried to conceal from me how much, fearing that I would tell Oliver.

"I don't think Cousin Ben ever really cared for poor Sophie," she said.

"Oliver says he worshipped her passionately."

My mother smiled.

"Didn't he?" I asked.

It was then that she told me the story of his having proposed to her first, with the implication that he had married Sophie on the rebound.

"Why didn't you marry him?" I asked.

"Because I didn't like him enough. And because I'd already met Father. You can't imagine anyone who'd met *him* being willing to marry Cousin Ben, can you?"

I considered that aspect, and could not quite see it. I was not particularly fond of my father, and there did not seem to me a great deal of difference between them. My mother noticed my failure to assent.

"You don't really think there's any comparison between them, do you?" she said sharply.

"Oliver says his father is a very *good* man," I said.

"He's a very selfish one," my mother replied. "He made poor Sophie very unhappy, very often."

"How?" I asked, hugely intrigued now.

"By his selfishness and obstinacy. He was very upset when she died, but I think a lot of that was remorse, because he knew how badly he had behaved to her."

"Was *she* very much in love with him?"

"I don't know. I don't think she could have been."

"Well, then, why did she marry him?"

"Because he asked her. And she wanted to get married. She didn't have a great many chances. She was never very pretty or very clever."

"Oliver says she was a very intelligent woman."

"She was a darling," said my mother, "but I wouldn't have called her very intelligent." It was then that she added: "You're not to tell Oliver and Joanna any of this. I never know how safe I am in telling you things. You always pass them on."

I thought about all this a great deal, and for the first time my faith in Oliver was shaken. His view of his parents, which I had accepted so admiringly, was proved all wrong, romantic, false and sentimental as he had often given me to understand that my own judgments were. I could not doubt in this instance that my mother knew what she was talking about, and her description of Cousin Sophie was a good deal nearer to my own view of her than Oliver's. As for Cousin Ben, he had always seemed to me quite ordinary, too. It was almost as hard

to believe in him as a selfish and unkind man as it had been to see him as the very fine one that Oliver had made him out to be, but it was a good deal more exciting. In any case, I knew now that Oliver was not infallible in his judgments, and that he did not know everything. There was a certain triumph in that knowledge, and a certain bitterness that I could never let him know, about this, at any rate, that I possessed it.

I tried to appraise his new stepmother when I met her, but did not know how to. How did one tell what people were really like? I asked my mother when we got home what she thought of her.

"She seemed to me a nonentity," she replied. "Perfectly pleasant, but a nonentity. I must say I hated seeing her sitting there in poor Sophie's house, among all her things, but that's not her fault."

I asked Oliver what he thought of her, now that she and his father were actually married.

"She's a very charming woman," he said. "She'll make my father very happy."

Finally, I went to Joanna. I did not know her very well; at fifteen, she had ceased to be the friendly little girl to whom I could tell stories, and had become a remote, uncomprehended figure oddly out of my range and reach, and a little contemptuous of both Oliver and myself. I asked her what she thought of her stepmother.

"She's a beastly woman," she declared. "A really beastly woman. Soppy and double-faced. Trying to come all lovey-dovey over me and put her arm round my waist one minute, and then reading my letters and my diary the next. I hate her. She knows I do, too, and I'm glad of it."

Now how, I asked myself, was I to reconcile three such divergent opinions as those? Which of them was right? Who knew the truth? It was very worrying.

Chapter Four

(1)

THE WAR WAS OVER. Oliver and I, by reason of our age, had escaped it to the extent of not being called up for the army. But it had affected our lives none the less. Had things been normal, we should probably have both gone to a university; I to Cambridge, because my brother had been there, and Oliver, following the pattern which our lives had begun to show as an inescapable one, to Oxford, where I would have envied him, since Oxford was the university made glamorous by literature. This much had been planned, between us, at any rate; but when we left school in July 1918, the war showed no signs of ending; the universities were depleted and no longer what they had been; and in any case we looked like having little time before the army claimed us—though Oliver, just to be different, I thought, talked of going into the navy. His father decided that he should spend that little time in his City office, learning business methods. Then, when the Armistice came, and Oliver put in his bid for Oxford, it turned out that Cousin Ben had other ideas. He did not approve of Oxford; he said that it made snobs of its men; Oliver was doing well in the office and had better stay there. How much opposition Oliver put up to this, I never knew; he would never let me guess how disappointed he was; by the time he told me that he was to stay in the City, he had already assumed the face that he had decided to put on it. He gave me all his father's

arguments as to why it was a good idea, and adduced several of his own as well. As usual, Oliver was not going to behave as I expected him to, and he was not going to be pitied. But I noticed that, from then on, his attitude towards his father changed; he never again referred to him as a good man or a fine one; and when I saw them together, I found that Oliver's curled lip and his general air of disdain were extended towards Cousin Ben now, too. Of his stepmother he still spoke pleasantly; I guessed that she had backed him in his Oxford project, but had failed to overcome what I remembered Mother describing as Cousin Ben's selfishness and obstinacy.

I, too, was working in the City. My father, perhaps on the evidence of what I had written, did not believe in writing as a career for me, and put me into a lawyer's office. It was the last thing he did for me. He had been ill for a long time and at the beginning of 1919 he died, but my next five years were sealed by my articles of clerkship. They held me tied, despite my father's death; Mother believed in carrying out what he had planned. In other ways his death was a release for me. I had never been close to him; I was fond of my mother, and, although she seemed sometimes sceptical of my abilities, I knew that if the least vestige of outside approval of my writing were to come my way she would not discourage it as my father might have done. The only trouble was, where was it to come from? My eyes were still turned towards the theatre, but I had as yet achieved no contact with it. My nearest approach to it lay in knowing Rita, who had become dramatic critic of *The Lady In Waiting*, and that did not seem to help me very much.

In an effort to survive the war, that paper had remodelled itself, aiming at a little more sophistication and modernity, and had promoted Claudia to a feature called 'The Letters of Lorraine', a weekly page addressed to

someone called 'Ma chere', full of aphorisms about a sect known as 'mere man', and a good deal of elementary and (as my mother slightly sourly pointed out) not always correct French. The theatre criticisms continued to be signed Claudia, but they were written now by Rita, and very occasionally she took Oliver with her to a second night. I would have given anything to be taken myself, but to her I was still the little boy she used to meet at the Winters'. I had hardly seen her in the intervening years, and another year had yet to go by before she noticed me. But at least I could tell myself that I knew a dramatic critic.

Her criticism was not of a very high order. It contented itself mostly with recounting the plot of the play, and if, here and there, she ventured a stricture, it was almost always negatived immediately. "The heroine's change of heart in the last act, when she realises that it is her husband whom she has really loved all the time, may be a little sudden and unconvincing for some tastes, but Miss Blank Blank plays her so charmingly and looks so ravishing in her clothes—described in an adjoining column—that we do not cavil, especially when we remember that it is Mr. Dash Dash who is her husband. We can only wonder how she managed to resist him so long." That was the kind of thing she wrote; but if occasionally I carped or mocked at it, it was largely because I had first heard my mother do so ("If we don't cavil, what does she bother to mention it for? If you want to learn about the theatre, you shouldn't waste your time on her rubbish; read the critiques in the *Sunday Times*"), and because I found in repeating these comments a balm for my jealousy of Oliver for knowing Rita and going with her to the theatre.

And then he told me that she was going to have a play produced. It was, I soon discovered from the papers,

only a one-act play, of which she was only part-author, having collaborated on it with a woman on the magazine, and it was to be played for a single performance only at a matinée given by one of the special societies that abounded at that time, but it was still an achievement to arouse envy and admiration in me. Never before had a play by anyone I had ever met been actually put on, and I took the afternoon off from the City, buying tickets for Mother and myself. It was something I could not possibly have missed. Oliver was supposed to go with his stepmother in seats which Rita had given him; but at the last moment Cousin Ben decided to keep him working in the office, and Joanna went in his place. She explained this to me when we met them going in, while Mother and Mrs. Winter exchanged politenesses.

"It's a beastly shame," Joanna said. "He knew how Oliver wanted to see this. It doesn't mean a thing to me or Thelma." She glanced over at her stepmother. There had been a battle in the beginning over Joanna's refusing to call her 'Mother'; Cousin Ben, I knew, had gone in for shouts, threats and punishments, but Joanna had won. "It's just a waste of the tickets. And it isn't as if he could come another time. This is the only performance. Daddy knew that, too."

We separated in the foyer, where I saw Rita talking to a group of people, and heard her saying: "Oh, I'm so nervous, you wouldn't believe." Then she saw Mother and me, waved and made grimaces, hiding her face behind her hands in pretended terror. We mounted to our seats, and I opened the programme. Yes, there it really was, the first of the three pieces: *All Square*, a comedy in one act, by Marjorie Rogers and Rita Carhill. I looked at the words, enviously, for a long time, and wanted to tell the woman sitting next to me that I knew the authoress.

The play took place in the lounge of a country hotel, to

which two couples had come for an illicit week-end, the woman in each case being the divorced wife of the other man. They all met by accident at tea, wrangled a little, fired off epigrams, grew jealous, tearful and sentimentally reminiscent by turns, and were finally given a philosophical harangue by a quaint and wise old waiter who talked them into going in to dinner with their former mates. There were bright quips about love and habit, marriage and divorce, and some coy play was made with the fact that it was afternoon, so that nothing had yet had time to happen between them. The offstage bedrooms got into the atmosphere a good deal. Mrs. Winter said in the interval that she thought it rather daring. Joanna said that it was drivel.

After the matinée Mother and I went to tea together at the Patisserie Belge, and I asked her how much of the play she thought Rita was responsible for, and how much her collaborator. Both of them had taken curtain calls, holding hands and bowing to each other.

"I can't imagine," Mother replied. "I shouldn't have thought there was enough there for *one* person to write, let alone two."

I looked up in astonishment.

"Didn't you think it was good?" I asked.

"Did *you*?" Mother countered.

"Y-yes," I faltered. "I thought it was quite good."

Actually, until that moment, it had not occurred to me to think anything about it at all, to have any critical opinion of it, any more than a child is critical of a circus. I had swallowed it whole, impressed by the mere fact of its production to a point where my ordinary faculties of judgment had become suspended. I stared at my mother.

"Didn't you like it?" I asked.

"I thought it was childish," she answered. "*You* could have done as well. Better. I'd be ashamed of you, if you

couldn't do better. You have done better, already."

This was astonishing. It was very rarely that my mother praised me or my writing. I flushed with pleasure and surprise.

"Which of my plays do you think better?" I asked.

"Any of them," Mother replied, putting down her tea-cup. "Now, you're not to repeat that. I know you."

This was something to think about and to treasure, though I could hardly believe it. Next day I bought all the papers on my way to the office. Only two of them covered the performance, and they devoted their notices mostly to the other two pieces in the bill, but one called Rita's play "an engaging trifle", and the other said it was "a gay and iridescent gewgaw, neatly turned and polished". I never forgot those phrases; would anyone ever say as much of anything that I could write, I wondered? Mother merely shrugged her shoulders when I showed her these reviews, saying that they did not change her opinion, and, encouraged yet still dubious, I picked what I thought to be the best of my own one-act plays, copied it out on the new Corona typewriter that had been my birthday present, and sent it off to the Society that had produced Rita's. It came back, a few weeks later, with a note saying that, as they had only recently produced a programme of one-act plays, they regretted that they were not interested in any more for the time being. I had heard in the meantime that Rita's play had been sold for amateurs, so I sent mine to the firm which bought it, but it came back from them, too. Obviously, Mother was wrong.

My point of view over this was not due wholly to modesty. When I came to think over Rita's play, it did not seem to me to be any great shakes, and I was willing to believe that mine might be as good; but only as good academically, so to speak. If I no longer thought Rita

had great talent, at least she had what it took, the power to get her work accepted. There was something about it that made people put it on, and that apparently was missing from mine. Whether or not I could do as well seemed to me beside the point; Rita's play had been acted; other plays of hers would probably be acted; mine, I told myself in sheer discouragement, never would. And that, after all, was the point of writing plays; to have them produced. So I turned away from the theatre, and started on short stories; arty and depressing little ones, static and without plot, in imitation of Katherine Mansfield, whom I was reading in the *Athenæum* just then, and quite extravagantly admiring. I sent these, as fast as I wrote them, to the highbrow magazines; they came back almost as swiftly, and my discouragement mounted. What was I to do? While I had been able to look to my writing to provide me with the way out from the office and the law, these had been tolerable; now it seemed as if they must absorb the rest of my life for ever, and that was a grim prospect. Was there no one who could tell me how to write?

(2)

Oliver and Joanna were not much use to me. Oliver was going through a period of admiring George Moore, and no one else. He told me that I had no style. Joanna, on the other hand, judged everything she read by the standard of her own preoccupations, which, at this time, were mainly sociological. She was a forthright and determined girl whose gods in literature were Bernard Shaw, Samuel Butler and John Galsworthy, and no work that had not at least some reference to the unequal conditions of the rich and poor made any appeal to her.

She thought my plays and stories trashy. There was really no point in my showing what I wrote to either of them, but they were still almost my only friends, my only close friends, and I clung to them from need as well as habit.

My relations with them had changed now more than a little. Their life no longer seemed more desirable to me than my own. It was true they still were richer than we were, had a car while we had none (although Cousin Ben made trouble about Oliver driving it), and that Oliver used to take me to lunch at restaurants that I could not afford, but I was acquiring a new set of values. There was a kind of life that I wanted for myself that had nothing to do with money. It was a life pictured very largely from my reading of novels, and memoirs of the pre-war poets; a life with friends, a great host of friends, writers, painters, musicians; laughing, gay, intelligent people; we would all live in rooms or studios, where we would sit up half the night talking about art and life; at week-ends we would take long walks in the country, sleeping at inns where there was good beer and bread and cheese; and in the summer we would travel, go abroad, and write each other long, gay letters. Life with Oliver and Joanna was nothing like that. I saw their home now as stifling and ordinary. I knew that they disliked it, too; that Joanna was talking of leaving it to become a nurse, and that Oliver's one dream was to have a flat of his own: but they were not the friends I wanted any more.

Yet we clung to each other, meeting as a threesome for lunch on Saturdays, going to picture galleries in the afternoon, and to theatres, where our tastes never agreed, in the evenings. On Sundays we took the country walks that I was longing to take in other company. I saw that other company sometimes in the pubs where we lunched, and looked at them enviously, unable to break into their circle. I remember a group of young men in an inn at

Amersham, sitting around a table with their mugs of beer, arguing about Stravinsky's 'Sacre du Printemps', and how I longed to inject myself into their conversation, how eagerly I listened, hoping that one of them would notice my attention. Joanna commented bitterly on them as we left; she said she had never seen a more poisonous-looking gang, or heard more precious drivel talked. I caught Oliver looking at me and smiling, and knew that he knew what I had been thinking. We came very near to quarrelling that afternoon.

Sometimes on Saturday evenings, instead of going to the theatre, we went to dances, squaring our party with a school-friend of Joanna's. Most often we went to a place in St. John's Wood that we called 'The Studio'. This was a long room, belonging to a poster artist, where twenty or thirty people came on Saturday nights to dance to a gramophone for the price of five shillings a head. They were mostly people of our own world, but people interested in or vaguely connected with the arts; respectable, suburban Bohemia; and you had to be introduced by someone who was a friend of the host. Rita had taken Oliver there once, and had put him on the list of members. She seldom visited the Winters' home any more, but Oliver still saw her sometimes, and was apt to drop her name into his conversation, especially if I had been annoying him. He knew that it still had power to tantalise me.

The Studio was the nearest I could get to the world I wanted. We never met or talked to anyone else there, keeping to our own foursome, but at least there were the posters and the drawings, some of them the originals of theatre posters I had seen in Tubes and on the hoardings; there were the stained floor, and the big divans, heaped with black and orange cushions, pushed against the panelled walls; and occasionally I would see a small-part

actress, or a painter I had heard of. I hoped always to see Rita there, looking around for her half the evening, and hoping that Oliver would not notice that I was doing so. I was beginning to suspect him of arranging our visits only on evenings when he knew she would be absent, when at last, one night, we ran into her.

We were our usual party of four, and Rita's party was a foursome, too, consisting of a young doctor and his wife, and the wife's brother, an army officer on leave from India. Rita did not seem very interested in them, however; as soon as she caught sight of us, she greeted us with an exaggerated enthusiasm, and introduced us to her friends. Soon the groups were intermingling, and I found myself approaching her with tremulous formality and asking, like a small boy at his first party: "May I have the pleasure of this dance?" Her dark eyes twinkled at the phrase, and she said a little mockingly, as she took my arm: "Dear me, how well brought up he is!" I flushed a little as I led her to the floor and put my arm around her, thinking as I did so: "I'm dancing with a dramatic critic. I'm dancing with a playwright. I'm dancing with a fast woman."

After a few moments she looked up at me.

"Why, Teddy Attridge," she said, "you dance very nicely."

The name Teddy proved to me how long it was since we had met, and to what extent I was still a little boy to her. I had not been called Teddy since I was fifteen. I told her this. She opened her eyes very wide.

"Well!" she said, but still rather as though talking to a child. "It's Edward now, is it? Dear me, that sounds very serious. Are you serious?"

I did not know how to answer her badinage, but I did my best, and soon I was at ease with her, and we were sitting together on one of the divans, drinking the weak

and slightly sour punch that was included as refreshment for our five shillings, and smoking the Russian-blend cigarettes in coffee-coloured paper that I had recently thought it artistic to adopt. Rita affected to be very impressed with them.

"Why haven't we met before this?" she asked. "Why has Oliver been keeping you hidden?"

I found her very captivating. She was wearing a dress of silver tissue, with a silver butterfly, that was slightly tarnished, in her hair. She wore her hair long, and in a coil low on the nape of her neck; I remembered that in the past she had had it piled high, and the new style made her look different, more languorous and exotic. She was not pretty: her skin was sallow, her eyes a little too slanted, and her mouth and teeth too large; but she was fascinating. There was, I thought, something slightly Japanese about her appearance, and also something slightly French, although, apart from her eyes, I could not have told why I should have either of those impressions. Her manner was gay, arch, laughing, and provocative; she talked fast and a great deal, with much pantomime, and was vivacious to the point of restlessness, twisting and throwing herself about on the divan. When she got up from it, her dress was badly creased.

I asked her if she had written any more plays.

"Oh, aren't you nice to remember!" she cried. "Yes, I've written another. A full-length one, this time."

"When is it going to be produced?" I asked.

"I'm afraid it's not. I'm afraid they wouldn't let it be."

"Do you mean the Censor wouldn't pass it?"

She nodded, with mock-mournfulness.

"Why, what's it about?" I was really enthralled now.

"Oh . . ." she hesitated. "About a woman who has lovers."

"And?" I wanted to know more.

"Isn't that enough?" she laughed.

"Yes, but what happens?"

"She has more lovers. More and more and more." She trilled a little, and then checked herself, growing serious. "No. She only has two. In the play, that is. Though you know at the end she's going to take another. It's an unpleasant play, I'm afraid."

"Is it a tragedy?"

"Well, that depends on how you look at it." Her eyes danced, and then became grave again. "It's a serious play, anyway. But don't let's talk about that. It isn't interesting."

"Oh, but it is," I protested.

"Not a bit. Tell me about yourself. Do *you* write, by any chance?"

That was all I needed. By the time the evening was over, I had told her all my ambitions, and the plots of two plays that I had started, but had allowed to languish after their first acts. When we separated, she asked me to go to tea with her.

"Would you like to bring some of your things with you? Stories, or something? I d like to see them."

I promised to go the following Saturday afternoon. In the taxi on the way home Oliver was silent and Joanna snappish. I knew that I had behaved badly in monopolising Rita, neglecting Joanna and her friend; I was remorseful about it, but I had not been able to resist it, any more than I could resist telling Joanna when we went to a theatre a few nights later that I was going to tea with Rita.

"I thought you would," she said.

I scented antagonism.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"Nothing." She shrugged. "I just thought you

would. She was all over you the other night." Then she turned on me suddenly. "Did you really *like* her?" she demanded.

"Yes, of course I did. Why? Don't you?"

"I can't stick her."

"Why not?" I was really astonished.

"Because she's so silly and false and gushing, and all over everything. Men, especially. I can't stand the way she starts wriggling the minute a man comes into the room. It's not as if she wasn't old enough to know better."

"I thought you all liked Rita so much," I said.

"I don't know where you got that idea," she returned. "Oh, Oliver likes her, I think. I don't know why, except that she takes him to theatres. I think he's got an idea she's dashing, or something. Oliver's a fool, anyway, about some things. All men are. Oh, I suppose it's not altogether Rita's fault, when you think of the way she was brought up. All that money, and silly luxury. But at least when she had to go out and earn her living, I should have thought she could have found something better to do than that drivelling stuff she writes for that soppy magazine."

Joanna, I decided, was prejudiced. Prejudiced, and perhaps a little jealous. She was a handsome girl, with copper-coloured hair that gave a flame-like quality to her appearance, but despite her good looks she had a hardness and an intransigence of manner that made it difficult to think of romance in connection with her. It seemed to me that Vivie, in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, might have been rather like her. My mother had commented on this once or twice, saying that Mrs. Winter really should take her in hand and do something about her before it was too late.

"There's nothing soft or warm about her," was

Mother's judgment. "You can't imagine any man wanting to make love to her."

"I don't think Joanna would want any man to make love to her," was my reply.

"Nonsense," Mother answered. "Every woman wants men to—well, if not to make love to her, at least to be attracted to her. It's only natural."

I had sighed at that, thinking my mother old-fashioned. That was the Victorian attitude and theory against which girls like Joanna were in revolt. Joanna was always in revolt against something, usually her stepmother; if Mrs. Winter did try to take her in hand, she would not have much success, I thought. But to-night, in the face of her attack on Rita, I began to wonder whether my mother might not be right about Joanna, whether there was not something missing in her. I liked her; we were good friends; but it was very like being with another man, and while that was all right for us who, after all, were cousins and had been brought up almost as brother and sister, it might not be so good where other men were concerned.

I had noticed, the few times that I had introduced Joanna to friends of mine at dances, that they did not take to her, danced their one duty dance with her, and then went off after fluffier, stupider girls. Perhaps she was aware of it, and minded; I had never thought that she would mind, but perhaps I had been wrong. Perhaps she did want to be attractive to men, want them to make love to her. Perhaps that was why she felt as she did about Rita, who was obviously a very feminine woman; you could not talk to Rita for a minute without being aware of some kind of sex challenge. I remembered the legend of Rita's 'fastness'; I thought of her play about the woman who had had lover after lover. I was not sure yet whether Rita was a 'bad' woman, in the conventional sense of the word, but at least she was a—well, a priestess

in the temple of sex, and I was inclined from my reading to believe that the average 'good' woman's attitude towards the woman of experience was very often based on envy.

Joanna's attitude was not a moral one, or at any rate not consciously so; we had discussed free love, and she had said that she saw nothing wrong in people living together; that she approved of it, in fact. But, as I thought of it now, it seemed to me that there was something too theoretic about her attitude; it was based too much on principle; and that, I decided, if Joanna were ever to live with a man, would probably be how she would do it—deliberately, having thought it over, weighed the pros and cons. Sex, with her, would be something attended by banners, martial music and possibly even pamphlets; with someone like Rita there would be low lights, gardenias and violins, perfumes, draperies, champagne. Which was perhaps why Joanna's denunciation had a fierceness not so different from the puritanical denunciation of the fallen woman. Envy, I told myself, was at the root of her attitude: envy and jealousy. I looked at her hard while I was thinking this, sitting beside her in the theatre, and she caught me at it.

"What are you staring at me like that for?" she demanded.

I jumped.

"Was I? I didn't mean to."

"What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking anything."

"Yes, you were. What was it?"

I felt that she had guessed, and I grew uncomfortable.

"I was only thinking which of my things I should take Rita to read," I lied.

"I don't know what you want to take any of them for. What does she know about writing?"

"She's had a play produced. And she's a critic."

"I could write better criticism than she does with my big toe," Joanna answered.

"Well, perhaps she could help me get something published," I said.

"Oh, well, I suppose that's different." Joanna seemed mollified. The curtain rose, and we did not speak of Rita again.

Undressing for bed that night, I thought over my diagnosis of Joanna and her attitude, and was convinced that I was right in it. As I switched off the light, I felt a little glow of pride in having made a character analysis on my own at last; in having arrived, unaided, at a judgment about someone. Perhaps I was growing up. Perhaps my work would be better now, too. I could not wait to write a psychological story about a girl like Joanna. I thought it would be effective to end it with her being raped, but I could not imagine who would want to rape her. Perhaps it would be more artistic not to let anything happen at all; just to keep it as a study in the modern manner; to present her protestations, indicate her envy and her jealousy, and then end it with a 'click' phrase or a line of dialogue, from which you would deduce the whole rest of her life. I fell asleep, trying to think what that phrase could be.

Chapter Five

(1)

BUT THE STORY ABOUT JOANNA WOULD HAVE TO WAIT, I decided next day, until after I had seen Rita. I spent the remainder of that week in going over my writings, making fair copies on the typewriter, picking out about a dozen poems, five short stories, and the aborted first act of my last play. On the Saturday afternoon I put on my best blue suit, a stiff collar with long points, and a new blue and white check tie. I went by bus and left our house so early that I arrived at ten minutes past four, having been invited for half-past, and spent twenty-five minutes walking around the streets and looking at the magazines on the bookstall at South Kensington station. Then I presented myself at Rita's flat.

It was not quite what I had been expecting, which was something studio-ish and romantic, with perhaps a musicians' gallery running around it. Instead, it was the converted top floor of a quite ordinary house, rather barely furnished and with sloping attic ceilings. But there were woodcuts on the walls; two tall red candles and some cardboard figures of Russian Ballet characters on the mantelpiece; an Elizabethan lute lying on top of a chest beside a pile of theatre programmes; and a shelf full of paper-bound plays in the bookcase: all of which helped to give the place an intellectual and artistic air, different

from the houses and flats that I normally visited. Rita was wearing a jumper and skirt, with an amber necklace, and sat crouched on a hassock, very near the floor, while she gave me tea. The tea was China, which I did not much like, but she talked about it as something very special, and there were little liver-paste sandwiches that she called *pâté*, and a plate of chocolate leaves. She apologised for not having a cake; she had meant to go and buy one, but she had been working all day.

"Writing?" I asked.

"Trying to," she said.

"Another play?"

She nodded.

"But let's not talk about it," she said. "What about your things? Did you bring them?"

I fished them out of the pocket of my overcoat.

"Are you going to read them to me?" she asked.

"May I?"

"Of course. What are they?"

"Well, there's a bit of everything. Some poems, short stories, part of a play . . ."

"Suppose you read me the poems. I'd rather read the stories and the play myself. Wait a minute. I'll arrange the light."

She placed me under a lamp, turning out all the other lights, and then resumed her place on the hassock, staring at the gas-stove as though it were a fire. I was suddenly reminded of *Candida*. I read the dozen poems I had brought; she made no comment as I came to the end of each, but merely said: "Go on." When I had finished there was a long silence.

"They're very modern, aren't they?" she said.

"I don't know. Are they?"

"I think they are."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, their subjects, and the sort of language you use."

I knew what she was referring to. I had been influenced by some of the Georgians, their contemporary, domestic and often squalid settings, and their use of colloquial phraseology. I had written a poem about a pit queue, with the sick and shabby entertainers described in considerable detail; and another one about slum children that began:

> "Children of Lilac Villas playing cricket.
> Before the single lamp-post for a wicket,
> A boy with ringworm holds a bat."

There was a poem called 'Ballroom', with a passage that I thought rather daring about a girl:

> "Breathing the nearness of her partner's face
> In breath, tobacco-tainted, and the scent
> Of hair-cream, sweet and sticky";

and in one longer poem, some of which was in dialogue, I had used the phrase: "You bloody fool", largely in imitation and attempted betterment of Brooke's: "Oh, damn, I know it," in 'Grantchester'.

If Rita's comment had come from my mother (and similar ones very often had) I would immediately have been up in arms and scornful, but from her I took it gently, though it surprised me a little, all the same. I tried to explain to her what I thought modern poetry was about; what it was trying to do.

"Yes, I know," she said. "I know all that, but it seems . . . ugly to me."

"It's meant to," I said, stoutly. "Life *is* ugly."

"Yes, I know it is," she said again. "But I don't think

poetry ought to be. Poetry ought to be romantic."

"*All* poetry?"

"I think so," she said. "But I don't really know anything about poetry. I just know what appeals to me, what I think it ought to be like. I think yours are very good," she added, hastily "only they're not quite *my* kind of poetry, that's all. I'm sorry."

"I've written other kinds," I said quickly, realising that I had made the wrong selection. "I didn't bring them, but I can remember one or two. I'll say them to you, if you like."

"Please do."

I said three. They were sonnets, again very much in imitation of Rupert Brooke. One was about friendship; one about shared memories of what I termed 'affectionate small things', like jokes and glasses of ginger-beer; and the third was about love. That, I was sure, would get her. It was only when I was half-way through reciting it that I remembered that it was about unhappy love, bitter and abusive in the best Brooke manner, because the lady had been faithless and had 'given her love too easily away'. The word 'whore' occurred in the last line; I saw it standing there ahead of me and could not avoid it, could not think in time of a politer synonym; in my embarrassment it came out rather too loud when I finally reached it.

Again there was a silence.

"Have you been in love?" Rita asked.

I squirmed at this, as though she had put her finger cold on the insincerity of the poem.

"I think so," I lied.

"Often, or just that once?"

"I don't know. A couple of times, I think." I had to say something.

"Are you in love with anyone now?"

"No. No, I don't think so."

"Was that last poem true?"

"Sort of." Oh, why couldn't we stop talking about it? "Did you like those better?"

"Yes," she said, "I liked them better. They're more like my idea of poetry. Real poetry. Have you read *Cyrano de Bergerac*?"

"I know it," I said, evasively.

"That's my idea of real poetry," she said. "Warm and . . . glowing . . . and . . . *breathing* love."

"Yes," I said.

"I don't know what there is in English quite like it, unless it's *Paolo and Francesca*. You know *Paolo and Francesca*?"

I had heard Stephen Phillips' verse drama mocked at, but had never actually read it. I did not quite know what to say.

"I know *of* it," I said warily.

She began to quote.

"O face immured beside a fairy sea
That leaned down at dead midnight to be kissed!
O beauty folded up in forests old!
Thou wast the lovely quest of Arthur's knights—"

Her voice changed to Francesca's, low and murmurous.

"Thy armour glimmered in a gloom of green."

It became a duet.

"Did I not sing to thee in Babylon?"
"Or did we set a sail in Carthage Bay?"
"Were thine eyes strange?"
"Did I not know thy voice?

All ghostly grew the sun, unreal the air
Then when we kissed."
"And in that kiss our souls
Together flashed, and now they are one flame,
Which nothing can put out, nothing divide."

It seemed to me that the afternoon had got out of hand. I had not been prepared for this, and did not know how to deal with it. The lines from *Paolo and Francesca* meant nothing to me, except that they sounded vaguely reminiscent of Jessica and Lorenzo in the last act of *The Merchant of Venice,* but I had practically stopped hearing them after a moment, listening only, with surprise and embarrassment, to the throb in her voice. Now, when that stopped, the room seemed suddenly a tiny vortex of discomfort. I heard the small roar of the gas-fire, and distantly the sound of traffic in the street outside. Rita sat very still.

"Yes," I said, rather solemnly, at last, for the sake of saying something, though I had no idea what my 'yes' meant. "Yes," I repeated.

Again there was silence, and then the telephone rang. She rose to answer it, as though shaking herself free from a dream. Her opening "Hello" sounded as though she had been called from the dead, and was not pleased about it. Then, when she heard the voice at the other end, her own voice brightened. It was obviously someone she was glad to talk to. In a moment she was laughing merrily and trillingly, as I remembered her doing at the dance the week before.

"As soon as you like," she ended gaily, and hung up. Then she switched on the desk lamp, and looked across at me as though amused at something.

"Well," she said, "now we must come back to earth. I'll clear the tea-things and bring in the drinks."

I rose.

"I ought to go," I said.

"No, why? Stay and help me. Stay and have a drink."

"Haven't you someone coming?"

"Yes, but you needn't go because of that. Come and help me."

Together we carried the tea-tray into the tiny kitchen, and fetched sherry, gin and vermouth from a cupboard.

"What will you have?" she asked me.

I was not very accustomed to drinks.

"I think a Gin and Italian," I said.

"And I'll have a Gin and French. Will you mix it for me?"

I poured the drinks, hoping I was doing it right. Rita took her glass, and sat in an arm-chair, kicking the hassock out of the way. Now that she was on a level with me and the lights were all on, I wondered why I had been so uncomfortable only a few moments before. I was having drinks with a dramatic critic in her flat, waiting for her friends to arrive. Perhaps there would be someone famous.

"Tell me about Joanna Winter," she said.

"What about her?"

"Everything. Is she nice?"

"Yes, very."

"You're not in love with *her*?"

"Good Lord, no!" I laughed.

"Why do you laugh?"

"I don't know. I just can't imagine anyone being in love with Joanna."

"She's a very good-looking girl."

"Yes, I know."

"I don't really know her any more. She's very clever, isn't she?"

"Yes, I think so."

"She seemed sort of . . . spikey . . . to me, the other night. Sort of defensive and abrupt. Is she always like that?"

"Yes, I think she is, rather."

"Why? What's the matter with her?"

"I don't think she's very happy at home," I said.

"Oh, why not?"

"I don't know. I don't think she likes her stepmother."

"Is she unkind to her?"

"No. I don't think so. But I don't think they get on. I think Joanna would like to be on her own, working, or something. I think she'd like to be living on her own. Oliver would, too."

"Yes, I know. He's told me. But it's different for a boy. Besides, Joanna's a little young for a latchkey or a flat of her own, don't you think? Though I do understand her wanting it. Do you know, I think the best thing that ever happened to me was my father losing all his money, and my having to get out and go to work. When I think of the life we used to live—Mother's At Home Days, and the dinner parties and the dreariness . . ."

"Dreariness?" I was amazed.

"Oh, it was. Of course, it was nice to have nice things, but I'm really far, far happier now in this little pig-sty than I ever was in Avenue Road, or even when we lived in Mayfair. And when I look at my sisters . . . you remember Lily and Rose?"

"Of course."

"Well, Rose's husband isn't very well off, but he's doing all right and they've got a nice little house at Harrow-on-the-Hill with a tennis court and a Baby Austin, but I wouldn't change places with her. And Lily . . . she married again, you know. Very happily, too, with two lovely children. Her husband's quite rich. She's got

a beautiful flat, two maids and a nurse, and a car with a chauffeur to take her everywhere, and everything she could want. But when I go and see her, or go to dinner there . . . listen to all the talk about servants and prices and babies . . . I feel as if I were being stifled. I don't think *she* feels it; I think she's quite happy, but that's her temperament. I'm devoted to her; she's a darling; but we're about as unlike as it's possible for two people to be. Actually, I believe Lily's sorry for *me*, living the way I do. She can't believe I like it. And Mother—well," she laughed gaily, "Mother gave me up as a bad job years ago, poor darling. I think Father understands. I've always said Father was a buccaneer at heart. You knew that he and Mother had separated, didn't you?"

"No!" I sat up in astonishment.

"Oh, well, not officially, I suppose. Don't say anything to the Winters about it. They still sort of keep up appearances, for Mother's sake. I mean, there's the flat, but Father's never there. He lives at his club, or . . ." she broke off. "I adore Father. We go out to dinner, to funny little restaurants and have the *best* time together, just like a couple of pals." Again she checked herself. "How did I get started on all this?" she asked. "What were we talking about?"

"I think about Joanna," I said.

"Oh, yes. About her being unhappy at home. Well, I expect Joanna's like me, a Bohemian at heart."

"Oh, no, it isn't that," I said. "I think it's something else."

"What?"

"Well," I said, "I don't think Joanna's very attractive . . . to men. And I think she sort of knows it, and . . . well . . . minds, but won't admit that she minds, and that that's why she's so interested in politics and social conditions and things like that, but really she'd love to

have the . . . well, the kind of good time *you* have. I mean, she likes dancing, though she doesn't dance very well."

"Oh, poor darling." Rita looked very concerned. "It's silly, because, as I say, she's a good-looking girl. Very. She's much better-looking than I am, really. I'd give anything to have that hair of hers. But she doesn't know how to make the best of herself. I wonder if I could take her in hand."

"I don't think it would be easy," I said.

"Oh, I'd do it very, very tactfully. I must get hold of her, and see what I can do. Does she like the theatre?"

"Yes, I think she does. Only, sort of serious plays."

"Well, the next time a serious play comes along, I'll ask her to come with me. I hate to think of her being unhappy. Does she know many men?"

"I don't think she does."

"Doesn't Oliver bring his friends home for her?"

"Oliver hasn't got a lot of friends," I said. "Not men friends. I'm practically his only one."

"Oh, but that's all wrong. For Joanna, I mean. I must introduce her to some men."

Then the door-bell rang, and we were interrupted. The visitor, she explained as she went to the door, was an American writer whom she had met a day or two before. He did not know anyone in London, and was taking her to dine and dance. He proved to be a man in his late thirties, untidily dressed, with a handsome, rugged face, fair hair cut very short, and deep-set, tired, yet oddly penetrating eyes. He had a slight stammer. Rita introduced him as Mr. Bruce Markham, and offered drinks.

"Sherry, Gin and French, or Gin and It?"

"W-what's Gin and It?" he laughed.

"Gin and Italian," Rita explained. "Italian Vermouth."

"What—without ice? Just straight—not even shaken

up, or anything? It sounds awful. I'll have some sherry."

We sat down. I felt that I should go, but did not know how to. Rita led the American to talk about himself. He seemed quite willing to do so. He was a married man, he said, with two children, a boy and girl of eight and ten. His wife, who was a decorator for one of the big stores in Chicago, had brought the children up; now he was to have them for the next five years. It was an agreement that he and his wife had made when the children were born. He wanted them to get to know France, he said, and was going over in a week or two to look for a house for them. He told it all rather seriously.

"And are you and your wife not going to meet for the next five years?" Rita asked.

"Oh, she'll come over in the summer each year."

"It sounds an odd marriage."

"It's a sensible one."

"And isn't she going to be jealous of you, away from her?"

"My wife and I understand each other," he said. "We're adult people."

Rita looked puzzled.

"It doesn't sound very romantic," she said.

"It's not," he answered quietly. "It's civilised living. And I don't think marriage is a romantic thing anyway. My marriage almost went on the rocks in the first two years by our trying to be romantic about it. That's why my wife took up a profession. You can be romantic about love affairs, but not marriage."

I could see that Rita was bothered by all this. She tried to laugh at it.

"It all sounds very French to me," she said.

"The French are a d-damned sensible people," he answered.

"You mean—your wife wouldn't mind your having love affairs?"

"I don't think so. In fact, I'm sure not. She knows what people are."

"And you wouldn't mind *her* having them?"

"Not at all."

"I don't believe it," Rita said firmly.

"Why not?"

"Because . . . oh, because it's not human nature, not to be jealous."

"I don't think that's anything to be proud of."

"What do you mean?" Rita was definitely out of her depth.

"I think jealousy's a contemptible emotion."

She took refuge in archness, as a defence against his seriousness.

"And do you intend to have love affairs while you're over here?" she asked, looking up at him from under her eyelids.

"If I'm lucky," he said with a little smile.

Somehow she seemed to regard this as a challenge that pleased her. I could see her beginning to wriggle a little. I would not have thought of it like that if Joanna had not so described it.

"I think it's shocking," she said, laughingly. "And I don't believe you mean a word of it. Do you, Teddy—Edward, I mean?"

I was drawn back into the conversation. She told him that I wrote, that I had been reading her my poems. It had a romantic sound, as though I had been reading love poems to her. Bruce Markham looked at me interestedly. I asked him about his writing. He said he had published one novel, and a book on Proust. He was preparing a book on modern French literature, and had a letter of introduction to André Gide which he was going to

present when he got to Paris. The clock showed that it was half-past six, and I realised that I must go if I were to get home in time for dinner. Rita took me to the door. She gave me back my poems, and kept the other things.

"I'll read them to-morrow," she said. "When can I see you to tell you about them?"

"Any evening, or week-ends."

"Would you like to come to the theatre one night? There's a new play at the Criterion on Tuesday. Would you like to come with me on Wednesday?"

I jumped at the idea. It was happening at last. I would be going to the theatre with a critic. I asked her to have dinner with me first, suggesting an Italian restaurant in Soho, and we arranged to meet there.

"Oh," I said, turning back at the door with a sudden worry, "do I dress?"

She considered it for a minute.

"I don't think you need," she said, "if it's a trouble."

"Well, it is a little, coming from the office. But I can. I can take my things down in a suitcase."

"No, don't bother," she said. "It isn't as if it was a Cochran show. It's just a comedy. Lots of people don't dress."

We agreed that I shouldn't, but I went away feeling that I ought to have insisted.

(2)

Going home on the Underground, I reviewed the afternoon, and was on the whole not displeased with it. I did not think she had liked my poems very much, but she had said that she did not know anything about poetry, and if *Paolo and Francesca* was what she admired, quite naturally she would not understand anything modern.

It was like my mother and modern painting, to which I had tried to introduce her; she just couldn't see what people wanted to paint like that for. I could feel superior to Rita about my poetry, and there had been a spice to the rest of the afternoon: the flat, the drinks, and meeting an American author with ideas about civilised living.

At dinner I related as much as I could to my mother, colouring and twisting it very slightly to give the impression that it had all been a little more interesting and stimulating than I had really found it. Mother was intrigued by what Rita had told me of her parents; apparently she had heard gossip about it already.

"I'm very surprised at Rita's telling you, though," she said.

"She said her father had always been a buccaneer at heart," I reported.

"There are some people who would use a stronger word for it than that," Mother said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there was a suggestion that there was something a little shady about his bankruptcy."

"How do you mean—shady?"

"Well, dishonest then. I don't think anything was ever proved, but . . ."

She left the sentence unfinished, going on to ask me more about the afternoon. I told her of my talk with Rita about Joanna, and looked up to find her staring at me.

"You talked like that to her about Joanna?" she said.

"Yes, why not?"

"What did you say—exactly?"

I began to stammer.

"I don't remember exactly. I said that I thought Joanna wasn't attractive to men."

"Edward, you didn't!" My mother's voice was horrified.

"Yes, why not?"

"Because, in the first place, you should never discuss one friend with another. And, in any case, Rita isn't a friend of yours. You hardly know her. Supposing it gets back?"

"It won't," I said, rather frightened now.

"How do you know? She might perfectly well tell Oliver what you said. Do you think it was very nice or loyal of you to talk like that about Joanna, behind her back?"

"You've said the same things yourself," I retorted.

"That's got nothing to do with it. You didn't tell Rita I'd said that?" she asked, quickly and alarmedly.

"No, of course not." Had I? I wasn't sure.

"I hope not. Really, I shouldn't talk to you at all, if I can't trust you to keep things to yourself. I don't know how you could talk to Rita like that. I really don't. How do you think Joanna would feel, if she knew?"

"She won't know," I reiterated.

"I'm not in the least sure of that. And, in any case, that hasn't anything to do with it. You should never say anything about anyone that you would mind their knowing you had said, whether there's any likelihood that they will or not."

My sense of guilt made me angry.

"Would you like Joanna to know what *you*'d said about her?" I threw back.

"I tell you that's quite different. I'm an older woman. And I was talking to you in confidence."

"I was talking to Rita in confidence," I said.

"Nonsense," Mother answered sharply. "You don't talk in confidence to someone you scarcely know. You were just gossiping, that's all."

"I wasn't gossiping," I said heatedly.

"I thought you had more sense, and more tact."

That finished the discussion, but it left me worried and annoyed. Inside me, I believed that Mother was right, and that it had been both indiscreet and disloyal of me to talk to Rita as I had. Supposing she did tell Oliver what I had said? Supposing Oliver told Joanna? I had been a fool, carried away by a desire to show off, to prove myself knowing and sophisticated, and I was angry about it, angry with myself and with my mother for pointing it out to me. I spent the rest of the evening sulking, and went to bed both unhappy and alarmed, kicking myself for my stupidity. I felt uncomfortable with Oliver and Joanna when we went for our country walk the next day; I felt as though I had betrayed them. Also, I had not told Oliver that I was going to tea with Rita. My motives for not telling him were twofold. It had recently begun to dawn on me that he might have been deliberately keeping us apart, so as to make her sound more attractive, more desirable, when he talked of her, and his acquaintance with her a matter for envy to me. It gave me a sense of triumph now to have been invited by her, but I was aware, too, that if I told him of that triumph he would immediately seek to puncture it for me. He might admire Rita, but only so long as he could keep her to himself; if he knew that she had taken me up, that she had asked me to go to the theatre with her, he would almost certainly start disparaging her. Again, I felt a flutter of pride in realising that I knew this about him, that I had made another analysis of character.

But I felt guilty that I had not told him. I did not think that it was the right way to behave towards a friend. And what made it worse was that I had told Joanna I was going, but had not told her that I had not told Oliver. Had she told him, I wondered? I had no opportunity to ask her, and was terrified all day that she might speak about the afternoon in front of him.

Joanna however said nothing until we were alone.

"Well, does Rita think you're a great writer?" she asked.

My back went up at her tone, and I felt suddenly glad to have talked about her as I had.

"I don't know," I answered, surlily.

"What did she say?"

"She didn't like my poems,' I replied. "She didn't understand them. I left the other things with her."

"What's there about your poems not to understand? They seem simple enough to me."

"They're not her kind," I said. "She doesn't know anything about poetry. She said so. She thought they were too modern."

"Her idea of poetry is probably Ella Wheeler Wilcox," Joanna answered. "Poems of Passion. Do you remember how wonderful you used to think they were?"

"Did I?"

"Of course you did. Don't pretend you've forgotten. You used to recite them, with your voice absolutely throbbing. It's all right. I used to think them pretty marvellous, myself.

"Joanna," I said, after a minute.

"What?"

I swallowed hard.

"Did you tell Oliver that I was going to tea with Rita?" I asked.

"No, why?"

"Well, I'd rather you didn't, if you don't mind."

"Didn't *you* tell him?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I didn't. I forgot."

Joanna looked me square in the eye.

"You didn't forget at all," she said. "You just didn't want him to know. You wanted to keep it to yourself, as a sort of score off him. I knew that all the time. That's

why I didn't ask about it in front of him. It's all right. I won't tell him. You two are the most awful fools about that woman."

Her scorn and her directness, penetrating right to the heart of my pretensions and my cheap, unworthy motives, made me angry and uncomfortable, but I could not help knowing that she had behaved well in the matter, far better than I had done. Her honesty might embarrass me at times, as it did now, but I knew that it was admirable, even while I resented it. There was no deviousness about Joanna; you would always know where you stood with her; it might not always be pleasant, but you could rely on her to tell the truth. I knew that she would never talk about me behind my back as I had about her. If there were anything in me that she deplored or disapproved of, she would come right out with it to my face. I told myself that ordinary human intercourse would not bear so much honesty, and that a certain amount of tact and deception were necessary, citing *The Wild Duck* to myself in support of the theory, but I knew, too, that even if that were true, the behaviour of Oliver and myself had gone beyond what was required of us.

Chapter Six

(1)

I ARRIVED EARLY AT THE RESTAURANT on the Wednesday evening. The morning papers had given enthusiastic notices to the play we were to see, and I looked forward to a good evening. Umberto's was a small and rather dirty place that served a cheap *table d'hôte* dinner, but I was still unfamiliar enough with restaurants to be a little frightened of them, and I had at least been to this one before and knew exactly what it would cost. Besides, one of the girls in the office had told me of having seen a well-known character actress dining there once. I always looked for her on the occasions that I went.

We had arranged to dine at seven, so as to give plenty of time for Rita to talk to me about my stories. She arrived punctually, carrying them in the large envelope in which I had given them to her, and wearing a black lace dress under a rather battered musquash coat. She put the envelope aside, and said: "Let's wait until coffee with these, shall we?"

"The play to-night got good notices," I said, after I had ordered drinks: a Gin and French for her, and a Gin and It for myself.

Rita put her hands to her ears.

"Don't tell me, don't tell me. I don't want to know," she squealed. "I never read the critiques. I couldn't write a fair one myself if I knew what the others had said."

We talked about Bruce Markham. I had managed to get to a public library during one of my lunch hours, and had looked him up in *Who's Who in America*, where I had learned some details about him, and the names of his two books, which I had tried without success to get hold of. They had not, apparently, been published in England

"He's an interesting man," Rita said, "but such an odd mixture. Do you know, he's a most beautiful dancer? You wouldn't expect anyone who'd written a book on Proust to be able to dance at all, would you? I don't know how successful he is, but apparently he's very well off. It does sound like a strange marriage, his, doesn't it? I think he drinks a little too much. He has a theory that most people don't drink enough. He liked *you*, by the way."

"Me?" I was astonished.

"He wanted to know about your writing."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him you wrote very modern poetry. He said he'd like to see it."

I was flattered beyond measure. Presently the coffee came, and I pointed to the envelope lying beside her on the table.

"Well," I said, "what did you think of them?"

Rita looked down at the envelope, and then up at me, oddly.

"What do you want me to tell you?" she said. "There are lots of nice things I can say about them, or do you want me to tell you the truth?"

My heart sank.

"I want you to tell me the truth," I answered

"Well, then, I'm afraid I don't think they're *very* good," she said gently. "Your stories don't seem to *get* anywhere. They haven't any plots. They're all about people

who are unhappy, and they just stay unhappy. Nothing happens to them."

"Well, I think life's like that," I said.

"Perhaps it is," she replied, "but we don't want to be told that. Besides, we know it. There's nothing new in them. And they're so . . . so grey. Why do you want to write about people like that, people in the suburbs?"

"They're the people I know."

"But they're so depressing. You ought to write about exciting people, people you'd like to meet, who have exciting things happening to them. That's what people want to read about."

"But that's not what I want to write about. Besides, they're not that *kind* of story. They're not magazine stories. They're not trying to be. I want to write stories like . . . well, like Chekhov or Katherine Mansfield."

"Yes, I . . . I realised that," she said. "But if you're going to write that kind of story, you've got to write . . . well, very, very well indeed. Otherwise, you *must* have some sort of plot, or something. You don't mind my talking like this? It's only my opinion."

"No, it's all right," I said. "What about the play?"

She looked uncomfortable.

"Well, there again," she said, "it's so dreary and ordinary. Just an ordinary family. I don't know what you were going to make happen afterwards, but nothing happens in your first act at all. And your dialogue. That's ordinary, too. Dialogue in a play has to be bright and sparkling."

"Only if it's a light comedy," I said.

"Well, if you don't have bright dialogue, then you've got to have action. One or the other. But your people . . . they just talk like anybody."

"That's how I want them to talk. Like real people."

"But that's not what people go to the theatre for. They

want witty lines, or else strong situations. You ought to think of funny things for them to say."

I stared at the stained tablecloth.

"You mean you don't think I'm any good at all," I said, gloomily.

"I didn't say that," she answered. "I think you've got a lot to learn. But I don't say you won't ever learn it. You're still very young, you know. You mustn't be impatient. You try and think of a really good plot, with a good strong situation. And make it about interesting people."

"What do you call interesting people?" I asked, resentfully. "Rich people?"

"Yes, partly. People like to see nice clothes and furniture on the stage. Why don't you try and write *for* someone? Pick some well-known actor or actress, and write a play for them?"

"They'd never do it."

"That doesn't matter. It would give you a start. I mean, take a big star, and think of the kind of play or part they'd like. You can't see any of them wanting to do a play like this one, can you?" She touched my manuscript.

"You can have plays without stars," I mumbled.

"Yes, but then they have to be something very special. They have to be *about* something. Some problem or something. I'm only telling you what I think."

I nodded. It was what my mother had told me, too. And I believed that they were right. Right, as far as the public went, anyway. I did not write the kind of things that I did out of conviction, but because they were the only things I could write. I could not think of strong plots or witty lines. I had tried and tried.

"I'm sorry," Rita said. "But you did say you wanted the truth."

I looked at my watch. Fortunately, it was after eight, and we could leave. I paid the bill, fumbling indecisively over the tip, and we walked to our theatre, hurrying against a cold wind that prevented our talking. We spoke very little while we waited for the curtain to go up; I was feeling gloomy and depressed, and Rita was busy waving to friends and acquaintances, talking to a woman sitting behind us, and recognising celebrities who, for once, failed to thrill me.

The play was a light comedy about a divorcée who set out to win back her former husband from his second, and very unpleasant, wife. It took place on the Riviera, in a luxurious villa with french windows looking on to a painted backdrop of a very blue Mediterranean. Several of the characters had titles; there was a pair of impertinent young people with tennis racquets; a fat, elderly French maid who had hysterics; and a comic American. The leading lady wore beautiful clothes, of which I saw Rita making notes on her programme. The dialogue was bright and coquettish.

"You see what I mean?" Rita said, as the curtain fell on the first act.

In the foyer, where we went to smoke, there was a chattering, enthusiastic audience. A smart audience, too, which made me uncomfortably conscious of my office clothes, a little shiny at the cuffs and elbows.

"You can tell from the audience that the play's a success," Rita said. "As a matter of fact, I can almost always tell, the minute I sit down. The second night audience is a perfect barometer." She looked around her. "This is a *real* success."

Ordinarily, I would have been excited to be at the second night of a successful play. To-night I felt resentful. I resented Rita, the play, the idle, fashionable people standing around us, and myself for resenting them.

"I don't think the play's as good as all that," I said, a little grumpily.

"Oh, I think it's charming," she replied. "Gay and witty and refreshing. It's got so much sparkle and verve."

I looked around me, and saw Bruce Markham leaning against a wall. He was wearing a dinner-jacket of a very American cut, with satin facings, and a soft turn-down collar to his shirt. He was alone, smoking a cigarette, and looked bored.

"There's Mr. Markham," I said.

"Where?" Rita's voice was sharp and eager. Then she saw him. "Well, isn't that a coincidence?" she said.

Bruce looked up, recognising us, and his face brightened. He came across to join us.

"Hello there," he said, friendlily.

"Well, this is a surprise! What made you come here?" Rita asked.

"I read the write-ups in the papers this morning," he answered. "It sounded as if it would be good."

There was disappointment in his tone.

"Don't you think it is?" Rita asked.

He gave her a wry smile.

"Do *you*?" he parried.

"Yes, very. Why? Don't you like it?"

"Well, I've only seen the first act " he said.

"Didn't you like that?"

"Not very much." His words were music to me. "I was wondering whether to stay for any more."

"Not stay? Oh, but you must stay! You can't leave a play after the first act," she cried.

"I almost always do," he smiled.

"Are you all by yourself?"

"All by myself. You two are practically the only people I know in London."

"Well, then, stay, and we'll meet afterwards," Rita said.

Then the bell rang and we returned to our seats. In the next interval he was not to be seen, and I stood smoking alone while Rita darted among groups of people that she knew. As we went back, we saw Bruce coming out of the bar. He nodded and made gestures with his head, indicating that he would meet us outside.

The last act followed its predictable course to a happy ending in the heroine's boudoir, where, dressed in a lace négligée with chinchilla cuffs that made Rita and the woman behind us gasp, she sat down to a champagne supper with her former husband, at the little table she had had set up to make him jealous. Up to the last moment she had pretended that it was for herself and the Italian count whom she had actually jockeyed into running away with the unwanted second wife. The curtain fell on the two of them raising their glasses to each other in a toast of "Better luck next time". The audience laughed happily and applauded loudly, Rita among them. Then I helped her into her coat and we made our way to the street, where Bruce Markham was waiting for us, wearing a soft black hat and an overcoat with an astrakhan collar.

"Well, now let's go and have a drink someplace," he said. "Or can't one get drinks in London after the theatre? There seem to be a lot of screwy rules about when they'll let you drink and when they won't, in this country of yours."

"Of course you can get a drink," said Rita. "Until twelve, anyway. Half-past, if you have something to eat, and two o'clock on extension nights."

"That sounds very complicated," he replied. "Well, let's go, then. You'll have to tell me where."

We got into a taxi, which he hailed.

"Did you like the play any better after the first act?" Rita asked, as we drove off.

"Not much," he answered.

"Oh dear." Rita was disappointed. "What didn't you like about it? I thought it was very bright and charming."

"It was," he said. "That was the trouble. It was so *god-damned* bright and charming. Especially, bright. Look, I'm not criticising the English or anything. We have bad plays at home, too, only ours are usually sentimental ones. I've learned how to smell them in advance and keep away from them. Every country has its own special brand of bad, popular stuff, like the French bedroom farces and dramas about adultery. I guessed that the average English play would be like the average English cooking—all right, if you've been brought up to it. But I read *The Times* and the *Telegraph* this morning, and they made this sound as if it really had something—and one of the afternoon papers talked about Congreve and the comedy of manners. That's what took me there."

"You expected too much," said Rita.

"Yeah, I guess I did. But even if I hadn't expected anything, I think I'd have expected it to be better than it was."

"You really thought it *so* bad?"

"I thought it was Christ-awful," he said with a laugh.

I was enthralled. I was at the age, anyway, when savage and destructive criticism delighted me, and to have it directed at this evening's piece, which Rita admired, when my feelings were raw from her criticism of my work, was wonderful. In ordinary circumstances I would probably have liked this play quite well, but in the mood that I was in I would have found it hard to approve anything that made more concession to popular taste than 'The Lower Depths', and to have the popular taste

attacked by such an intellectual as Bruce with such vehement articulateness gave me an intense pleasure. I liked him better than anyone I had ever met. I liked everything about him, and made mental notes of the Americanisms in his speech for my own use later. I had never heard the phrase 'Christ-awful' before; it shocked me a little, but I thought it magnificent.

"If everyone had your standards," Rita said, rallying him a little, "there soon wouldn't be any theatre left."

"I sometimes wonder if that would be a bad thing," he answered.

"But what would happen to poor little me," she cried, "if there weren't any plays to criticise? How would I pay the butcher, the baker and the candlestick-maker?"

The taxi came to a stop.

"Here we are," Rita said.

"What is this place?" Bruce asked, as he opened the taxi door.

"You'll see," she answered. "It's a sort of night-club. Rather squalid, but sometimes it's fun."

She had taken us to 'The Fretful Porcupine', of which I had heard and read in the gossip columns. It was not a smart or fashionable club, but a large, cheap, after-theatre meeting place for students, writers, painters and musicians, the younger actors and actresses, and the sweepings of Chelsea and the Fulham Road. It consisted of a huge, square basement room, with pink distempered walls, on which was painted a procession of porcupines, each with a different face, remotely caricaturing artistic celebrities. The tables had red check cloths on them, and the supper menus were almost incredibly dirty. Rita and I had beer and kippers; Bruce ordered a double Scotch and soda, for which no ice was available. A small, pretty Eurasian boy, with one gold ear-ring, was playing the piano on a platform, and later in the evening a man and

woman, dressed as costers, sang Victorian music-hall songs, grossly parodied.

"I don't suppose you have places like this in America, do you?" Rita asked Bruce.

"Good God, yes. The Near North Side in Chicago is full of them. So's the Village."

"What village is that?"

"Greenwich Village. It's a part of New York where the artists live. The self-conscious ones who pride themselves on being artists. People who look like that." He pointed to a nearby table, occupied by two young men with very long hair, floppy *crêpe de Chine* bow-ties, and enormous rings on their fingers, arguing with a swarthy, hook-nosed man who wore a purple shirt and had obviously not shaved for several days. With them was a woman with an Eton crop, wearing a Gaucho hat and a powder-blue gendarme's cloak.

"The man in the purple shirt is Borenson, the artist," Rita said.

"I might have known it," Bruce answered, smiling.

"Do you know his work?"

"I do."

"Don't you think it's good?"

"Not very," he answered.

"Oh dear, I'm afraid you're very hard to please," she said laughingly, though I thought she was a little embarrassed. "Do you ever like anything?"

"Oh, yes, I like some things."

"Proust?" she teased him.

"Proust, and other things."

"What other things? Tell me something you like. Come on, I challenge you." She was getting gay. "I challenge you," she repeated loudly. "Tell me one thing you like."

He considered, smilingly. "Well," he said at length,

"I like *Carmen.* I like Beethoven's quartets. And I like ventriloquists."

"What?"

"Ventriloquists. Men with dolls. Particularly when the dolls talk back."

"I was asking seriously," Rita said.

"I was answering seriously," he replied. "I *do* like ventriloquists."

"So do I," I said, eagerly. "I like them when the dolls break down and cry, and have to have their noses blown."

Rita gave me a quick and irritated glance, but Bruce laughed, and we went into a discussion of the ventriloquists we had heard, comparing notes and exchanging gags. Rita stared at us, looking from one to the other, trying, I could see, to decide whether she was being made fun of.

"We're not kidding," Bruce said, catching her expression. "It's quite on the level. As a matter of fact, if I had thought, I could probably have told you he'd like ventriloquists."

"How?" I asked.

"Because you're shy. Aren't you?"

"I suppose I am, a little." I found myself blushing slightly.

"Well, shy people always do," he said. "It's a release mechanism. The dolls are a kind of mouthpiece for them, giving the back answers they'd like to give themselves."

"What nonsense," said Rita. "Are *you* shy?"

"Very," Bruce answered calmly. "That's what makes me stammer. That's why I drink, too."

Again Rita seemed embarrassed.

"No, but coming back to plays," she said insistently. "What plays do you like? What plays have you *ever* liked?"

He shook his head. "No," he said. "I'm not going to discuss the drama with you now. I won't be serious in a joint like this. We'd be as bad as those dodos over there." He pointed to the arty table again. "Do people ever dance here?" He turned to me. "Would you mind if we danced? It's the only way I can keep us from getting on to Uncle Ibsen. Order me another highball, will you?" He led Rita to the floor, and I sat, watching them dance together.

At first, she leaned against his arm and slightly away from him, her head thrown back and rather to one side, looking up into his face, laughing a little and using her eyes expressively. Then, when I looked again, he had gathered her into what was perhaps a more American hold, their bodies very close together and his cheek against her hair. After a moment, as they turned, he found himself facing me, alone at the table. He smiled, and then released her slightly, reverting to his former way of holding her. Presently they returned and, after she had finished her beer, I asked Rita to dance with me. Bruce ordered more beer for us, and another whisky for himself; then, as it was getting late, he recalled the waiter and told him to make it two whiskies. As we passed the table on our next time round the room, I heard an argument going on as to the legality of the order.

"But there are only three people," the waiter said. "You can't have four drinks for three people."

"We're expecting a friend."

"Where is he?" the waiter asked.

"It's not a he, it's a she, and she's in the ladies' room," I heard Bruce say, and then, more authoritatively: "Listen, brother, you bring them. Never mind who's going to drink them."

Rita and I danced in silence for a while. I felt differently about her now. Something in Bruce's manner,

an adult, masculine taking of command, as well as a certain flippancy in his treatment of her, seemed to have stripped her of some of the importance she had had for me. Bruce, I was sure, was not impressed by her, though I felt that she attracted him, and somehow this flattered me, as though it were a compliment to me, almost as though I had provided her for him. Her disparagement of my work, which had hurt so badly three hours earlier, did not seem to matter any more; it was as if he had shown her judgment to be valueless. I wondered if he despised her, and wished that I knew. Ignobly, I felt that I did not know how to treat her until I knew what he thought of her. I tried to think of something to talk about.

"What are you going to say about the play?" I asked. "In your criticism, I mean?"

"I'm going to say it's very good."

"You really thought it was?"

"Yes," she replied, and then added: "Of its kind. It didn't set out to be anything important or world-shattering. It set out to be a nice, agreeable little comedy, and I think it succeeded. Admirably. It's a good little after-dinner entertainment."

"You thought it was better than that, after the first act," I could not resist saying.

"I liked the first act the best," she replied.

"I didn't think any of it was any good," I persisted.

She looked at me gravely.

"When you can do better yourself, then it will be time for you to talk," she said.

The reproof left me smarting, and I led her back to the table without speaking again. For the next half-hour I sulked, refusing to finish my beer, and tearing a match-box to pieces. I saw Bruce watching me narrowly. When we rose to go, he asked me if I would have lunch with him before he left for France. We arranged to meet

on the following Saturday. There was a little discussion about taxis, and who was to see Rita home. My manners told me that I should; my mood, my pocket and the knowledge that I had to get up at eight the next morning made me disinclined to do so. Bruce put in a formal offer to escort her, but was not very pressing about it. Finally, Rita solved the situation by insisting on going alone. "It's miles out of anybody's way," she said, "and I won't hear of either of you coming with me."

I could see that she was not pleased, however, as she shook hands with us, and drove off. Bruce walked with me as far as Piccadilly Circus station, talking very little. Then we said good-night.

(2)

We lunched at Simpson's. Bruce had been unable to decide between it and the Cheshire Cheese, both of which he had been told he ought to visit. He left the choice to me, and I picked Simpson's because I had been there before, and knew that you were expected to give fourpence to the carver. Over lunch he talked of Proust and Freud and Bergson and James Joyce. He told me a great deal about himself: of his childhood and his terrific mother-fixation, which was the basic cause of his stammer; of his wife, who had been completely dominated by her father; of the early days of their marriage and their bad sexual adjustment; of his theories for educating his children; the bed-wetting habits of his daughter, which had lasted until she was seven, and what they were due to; of his respect for French culture and the French way of life; and his theory that people did not drink enough. Drink released inhibitions. "I'm never really myself until after dinner," he said.

It seemed to me I had never heard such interesting or such startling talk. My head was reeling a little as we came out into the street at nearly half-past three, after he had had four glasses of yellow chartreuse.

"If you're not in a hurry," he said, "could we take a walk?"

We went down into the Embankment Gardens. It was chill and a little foggy; an early November afternoon, with a red disc of a sun, the trees bare and dripping, and the light already starting to fade.

"There's something I want to ask you," he said.

"Yes?" I wondered what was coming.

"It's about Rita. Miss Carlill," he corrected himself. "Are you in love with her?"

I stared at him.

"What?" I asked, in amazement.

"I don't mean to be impertinent," he said, "but I want to know. Whether there's anything there or not. Because if there is, I'll back out right now."

"I don't understand." I genuinely didn't.

"Well, look," he said, "I find her attractive, and I'd like to see more of her, but if there's anything between you two—well, then, naturally, I won't. I thought the other night I might be stepping on your toes."

"Not in the least," I cried.

"Well, I didn't know."

"Oh, *no*!" My tone was almost too forceful. "I mean, Rita and I . . . well, she's years older than me. There's nothing like that about it at all. I don't even really know her very well. I've always known her a little, but never intimately."

"Well, that's all right, then. That's what I thought. It's what she told me, too, but you never know with women, about a thing like that. And at that dive the other night you seemed upset about something. It

seemed to take hold of you suddenly, in the middle of the evening. I thought maybe it was because of . . . well, because of *us*, the way we were dancing together."

"Oh, no," I cried again. "That was . . ." I checked myself. "That was something quite different."

"Oh, well, good, then. That's why I didn't see her home, too."

I paused to think this over. It was very flattering; the first time I had been treated as an adult man. I tried to assume the tone of one, in speaking to him.

"You really think she's attractive?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "And, as a rule, I don't like English women, that way. They're too indifferent to f . . . fornication," he stammered over the word, "and they never seem to have anything but a pair of fried eggs on their chests."

"Are you going to have an affair with her?" I asked, naïvely.

"I'm going to try to," he answered.

"Do you think you'll succeed?"

"Yes, I think I will."

It was a very surprising conversation. I had a feeling that it was not a nice conversation; certainly not one which my mother would approve of. I had an idea that men ought not to talk like that to each other about women, but I was also quite sure that it was the way they always did talk. I went home feeling that I had grown up about ten years, and wondering very much about Bruce and Rita. I tried to imagine just how he would set about the affair, and where they would have it. I supposed that it would happen in her flat, and tried to picture it. I wondered how I was going to find out whether or not it took place. He had promised to ring me up before he left, and had said, too, that he might possibly postpone his trip. I supposed that that would depend on Rita, and

whether she 'let' him, which was the schoolboy phrase I still used in my head. I wondered if he would tell me. During dinner that evening my mother asked me what I was smiling at. I said: "Nothing," and then smiled again, which irritated her.

When I went to bed that night I wondered suddenly if I had been a fool not to have tried to have an affair with Rita myself, and decided that I had been. I knew that I would never have had the courage, but that did not seem to me to make any difference.

Chapter Seven

(1)

BRUCE STAYED IN LONDON TWO MORE WEEKS, and I wondered if that meant that he had succeeded with Rita I did not like, even after our conversation, to ask him outright, but when he came to lunch with me one day in the City, I asked if he had seen her, and he said that he had Then, very tentatively, I asked how things were going, and he answered "Fine" I was left to draw my own conclusions, and I did

After that, we talked about writing I wanted to know about his books and how well known he was as an author in America

"Not at all," he said "My novel sold three thousand copies The Proust book sold about a thousand I'm not a real writer at all by professional standards I couldn't make a living at it, if I had to But it's the thing I most want to do and, by God, I'll be a good writer before I die I don't mean a successful one, I mean a good one"

"I'd like to read your novel," I said

"I've got some copies with me I'll send you one It's not a good book, but it's got some things in it that I still think were worth saying, or trying to say"

Then he asked about my writing I told him what I could about it, and repeated what Rita had said

"I wouldn't worry too much about that," he laughed.

"I don't think Rita knows much about literature."

That was a comfort to me.

"Would you let *me* see it?" he asked.

"Yes, of course."

After lunch I showed him the Guildhall and the Bank of England, and took him through some of the back courts and alleys which, to make my life in the City tolerable, I had persuaded myself were romantic. Coming round a corner of one of these, we ran into Oliver.

I had been worrying over the problem of Bruce and Oliver, unable to decide which I wanted more—to show Bruce off, or to keep him to myself. I had decided that he was a new and important friend, and I wanted to talk about him, but I did not know how I was going to explain him. I had already had difficulty over Rita; only a few days before, Oliver had suggested our going together to the play to which she had taken me; he had read the notices in the papers.

"I've seen it," I said, uncomfortably.

"When?"

"Oh, the other night."

"You didn't tell me."

"Didn't I?" And then, unable to let well alone, I added: "Rita took me to the second night."

"Oh?" he said. "Was it good?"

"I didn't like it. I think she did," I replied.

He nodded at that, and let the subject drop, typically showing neither surprise nor interest in the fact of Rita's having taken me. It was tantalising, as I knew he meant it to be, to wonder what he felt about it, and in the face of that attitude I had been reluctant to tell him about Bruce, who could not be mentioned without further reference to the evening at the theatre.

I introduced them to each other now, uncomfortably. We talked for a few moments, Oliver displaying a kind of

deadly politeness; then he said that he had to get back to the office, and left us.

"A chum of yours?" Bruce asked, after he had gone.

"He's a cousin of mine," I said. "A sort of distant cousin. I've known him all my life." I could feel a note of apology for Oliver involuntarily creeping into my voice. "He's a friend of Rita's, too. As a matter of fact, it's really through him that I know Rita at all. Her family and his were friends."

"Tell me about her background," Bruce asked.

I gave him a sketch of it.

"The poor little rich girl?" he said, queryingly.

The phrase was new to me, except as the title of an American play.

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"The spoiled little girl who had everything she could want, and nothing that was really worth having. I was pretty much of a poor little rich boy, myself."

I had never thought of Rita like that, but it fitted with what she had said about herself.

"I suppose so," I said. "Although I always thought she enjoyed being rich. But she says she's a lot happier now."

"Well, at least she can feel she matters now," he said. "Even if it's only to the extent of a column in a woman's magazine."

"Have you read her criticisms?" I asked.

"I looked at one," he answered, "just for a minute. Then I put it down quick."

"Why?"

"It was embarrassing."

"But I thought you . . ." I hesitated for the word. "Liked her," I finished.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Can you like people, and feel like that about them?"

"Good God, yes. Because I like going to bed with a woman, it doesn't mean I have to admire her critical faculties."

('So they had,' was all I could think.)

"As a matter of fact," he went on, "I don't think she knows a damn thing about the theatre, or half the things she talks about. If you want to know, I think she's pretty much of a god-damned fool."

"Then why . . ." I left my question unfinished.

"Because she's got something. Sex. Sex vitality. And because she likes *me*. I like almost any woman who likes me." He saw my worried face. "It's perfectly true. It's part of what I went through as a child. It's very hard for me to believe a woman really likes me. When she does, well, I'm grateful. Very grateful."

This was a new light on Bruce. Until then I had thought of him as an accomplished lady-killer, confident and invariably successful. I was fascinated by this piece of self-analysis, but I was a little disappointed. I decided that I didn't believe it, and that he was just being modest. He left for Paris a day or two later, taking a batch of my writings with him and giving me his novel in exchange for them.

(2)

When I next saw Oliver I waited for him to ask about Bruce. When he did not do so, I knew it was because he knew that I was expecting him to, and I resolved not to mention him, either. It was the kind of game we always played with each other, and as usual I was the first to break down, as Oliver knew that he could count on my being.

"What did you think of Bruce?" I asked, finally.

"That American you were with the other day?"

"How do you know he was American?" It was a silly question.

"Wal, I guess it wasn't so difficult to find out." Oliver put on an atrocious imitation of an American accent.

"He doesn't talk like that," I said angrily.

"No?"

"No."

"Well, he wears very peculiar clothes."

"What's the matter with them?"

Oliver ignored this.

"Who is he?" he asked. "Where did you meet him?"

"He's a friend of Rita's. I think he's having an affair with her."

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, he more or less told me so."

"Charming man," said Oliver.

I was aware of having said the wrong thing, given the wrong impression, and tried hastily to correct it.

"It wasn't like that," I said. "He only told me because . . . well, because he thought in the beginning that *I* was."

"That you were what?"

"Having an affair with her."

"And were you?"

"Don't be an ass."

"Why am I being an ass? You might have been, mightn't you?"

I paused.

"Yes, I suppose I *might* have," I said.

"Anybody might have. *I* might have."

"Have you?" I asked, with sudden curiosity.

"Have I what?"

"Had an affair with her?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I haven't. But that doesn't mean that I couldn't have. Or that I mayn't yet, one day."

"Well, I think she's tied up at the moment," I said.

"I can wait," said Oliver.

I wondered how serious he was.

"Would you really like to?" I asked.

"I wouldn't go miles out of my way for it," he answered, "but I don't think I'd say no, if the occasion presented itself."

"And hasn't it, ever? You've seen plenty of her."

"There's never been that exact right psychological moment," he said.

I decided that Oliver was showing off, as usual, and that he had had no more serious thought of an affair with Rita than I had. I turned the conversation back to Bruce.

"He's a novelist," I said.

"A good one?"

"I don't know," I answered. "He's only written one. He gave me a copy, but . . ." I faltered, slightly, "I found it rather hard to read. I wish you'd read it."

"Why?"

"I'd like to know what you think of it. I couldn't get through some of it."

I hated making this confession, but it was true. Bruce's novel had dismayed me. It was written in a classical, erudite, but unspontaneous English. Long and involved passages of personal reflection, analysis and philosophy kept getting in the way of the plot, which concerned an infinitely protracted approach to adultery in Chicago; and what little dialogue there was seemed stilted and improbable. I had found it impossible to read more than half, try as I would. Yet so greatly did I admire Bruce that I was more than willing to believe the fault must lie in me, which was partly why I gave it to Oliver for his opinion. After all, I could not read Henry James, for whom Oliver had recently deserted his

allegiance to George Moore; and there was Proust, who was Bruce's own god; I had tried and failed with him, too. Oliver was reading him very slowly in French, and claimed to find him very impressive.

"He's written a book on Proust, too," I said. That, at least, I thought, should make Oliver respect him. I was torn between a wish that Oliver would like the novel and admire Bruce, and a desire to have my own opinion vindicated. When he returned the book, however, he managed, almost as though he were aware of them, to gratify neither of the wishes.

"I don't know why you found this hard to read," he said.

"Did you like it?" I asked, eagerly.

"Not very much," he said, coolly. "But I didn't find anything difficult about it. It seemed to me rather mediocre imitation Henry James, with a dash of Proust and water. I'll admit they're good masters."

The last of this seemed an easy diagnosis after what I had told him, but the whole analysis depressed me.

"I've got to write and tell him what I think of it," I said.

"Poor you," said Oliver, gaily.

"What shall I say?"

"That depends on how you feel about him. If you don't care about hurting his feelings, tell him you couldn't read it. If you want to spare him, you'd better think of some polite lie."

My predicament was not made easier by a letter from Bruce about my work, in which he said that I showed a nice sense of character and observation in my play and my stories, but that he thought I should try and develop more individuality of style and expression. "In your poems," he wrote, "I think you are trying too hard to be someone else all the time. As a matter of fact, I think that is true in

all your writing, but when you are dealing with characters, you have moments of being able to submerge yourself in them and forgetting to strike an attitude. Actually, I rather doubt if you have a true poetic gift at all, but I think you will be able to write fiction or drama, so long as you stick to writing what you know. But do stop worrying about how *you* emerge. The trouble with you is that you don't drink enough. If you did, you would stop bothering about yourself, and just be what you are."

I read the letter glowingly. It was the first professional criticism, other than Rita's verbal one, that I had ever had of my work. "A nice sense of character and observation": I clung to those words, treasuring them; they more than compensated me for anything that came after. I rushed with the letter to Oliver and Joanna, who showed a genuine pleasure that delighted and surprised me. I tried to hope that I would have been as pleased if someone had similarly praised Oliver for something.

"He must be a better critic than he is a novelist," Oliver said.

I could not show the letter to my mother, because of the line about not drinking enough (which had pleased Oliver, although Joanna had taken exception to it), but I relayed the rest of what he had written, and she, too, was pleased by it. "He sounds a nice man," she said. "I'd like to meet him if he comes back to England. You must ask him to dinner."

It was all the harder to know what to write him about his own book, after that. I tried reading it again, and found it no easier, but I picked out two passages, one a description of a winter's day in Chicago that I found pictorially graphic, and the other a disquisition on loneliness that touched a responsive chord in me, and I concentrated on those. The remainder of my letter was about myself and my gratitude for his criticism.

This, indeed, acted as a spur and an incentive, and for the next few weeks I wrote harder than I had ever done in my life before. I wrote in the office, I wrote at home in the evenings; I even took to writing in Tubes and on the tops of omnibuses. But Bruce's letter was not the only thing that drove me. There was an additional and even stronger spur in the thought of Rita. Her words, and particularly her rebuke while we were dancing, kept returning to me. And now they rankled. Bruce's attitude towards her, now that he was no longer around, had lost its power to assuage my hurt; his letter, instead of helping me in that direction, only filled me with a longing to show it to her. I had no opportunity to do so. I had not seen her since our evening at the theatre and, except for the chance it would give me to produce the letter, I did not wish to do so. I wondered if I could send it to her. My mother, to whom I had related Rita's criticisms, told me that it would be small and ungenerous of me. I hoped that Bruce or Oliver might tell Rita about it, although as I would not be there to witness her discomfiture there would be little satisfaction in it for me. I could only wait and bide my time. My one desire now was to write a play and to have it a success, to show that I knew what I was talking about, and that she didn't. Then, oh then, I told myself, I would patronise her; oh, how I would patronise her! I wasted quite a lot of time in imagining interviews with her when I was a successful playwright, and the bitter, sugar-coated, back-handed things that I would say to her.

Actually, although indirectly, she was responsible for my first publication. I read her review of the play that we had seen together, and was maliciously amused to find her not altogether enthusiastic over it. Her notice was a masterpiece of hedging, a series of conflicting concessions to her own first judgment, to the public which had

accepted the play as a success, and to Bruce's strictures on it. I sat down to write a parody of the play, in imitation of parodies that I had seen in *Punch*, a tabloid version exposing its banalities, its silliness and clumsiness of technique, and sent it to *Punch*, which accepted it. It appeared three weeks later, and they paid me four pounds for it. Unfortunately, however, Punch did not allow one to sign contributions, and the parody appeared anonymously. I wished that Rita could see it and know who had written it; I debated sending it to her, as I had wanted to send Bruce's letter; again my mother told me that I should not. I sent Bruce a copy to France, and he wrote back that he thought it very amusing. I wondered if he, perhaps, would send it on to Rita, but I thought it unlikely, in view of their relations. I gave it to Oliver, too, in the hope that he would pass it on to her. I never knew whether he did; it was something that my pride would not let me ask him. But I terribly wanted her to see it. My desire to 'show' Rita was becoming something of an obsession to me.

(3)

Presently, Bruce returned from France, planning to stay only a couple of weeks in London before he sailed to America. Following my mother's suggestion, I asked him to dinner with us. I extended the invitation over the telephone and, after he had accepted, he asked: "Is Rita coming?" This was a poser; I had not thought of inviting Rita. I could only stammer: "I . . . I don't know. I haven't asked her," and refer the problem to my mother.

"Rita?" she asked. "Why should she be coming?"

"Well, I don't know," I faltered. "I suppose he thought that, as I met him through her . . ."

"Do you want to ask her?"

"Not very much."

"I'm afraid you'll have to, if he expects it."

"Will I?" The situation reminded me of one of the Daily Difficulties: "What should Mrs. A. do?", with myself in the position of Mrs. A.

"I'm afraid so, since he asked. Did you know they were such close friends?"

That was a difficult one to answer.

"I knew they were friends," I equivocated.

"You say he's a married man. Is Rita a friend of his wife's?"

"No, she doesn't know her."

"Oh." My mother's tone conveyed a good deal. "Well, it's a little peculiar, but I'm afraid you'll have to ask her now. There's nothing else you can do."

So I asked Rita, telephoning her at her flat, unwillingly, and saying: "Bruce is coming to dinner with us on Wednesday. We'd like you to come, too." I had looked in the paper hopefully to see if there was not a second night to which she should be going, but the theatrical calendar was clear. Rita accepted, and there followed a long discussion with my mother as to whom we should invite to meet them; whom, to put it bluntly, among our friends I thought worthy to meet them. I might not want Rita there; I might be hurt and angry with her, but she was still a personage, a minor celebrity; and Bruce, after all, was an intellectual, a cosmopolitan, an author. You couldn't ask just anyone; my uncles and aunts, for example. My brother was married now, and living out of London, so that we could not ask him. Ought we to ask Oliver and Joanna? I felt that we ought; Mother felt that we ought; but I did not want to. I had a feeling that they would seem too immature and juvenile, compared with Bruce and Rita. Oliver's cynicism and Joanna's

intolerance seemed callow and unattractive, when I imagined them in contrast with Bruce's poise and worldliness. In the end, we compromised by inviting a husband and wife, friends of my mother's; they were quite elderly, but they had recently returned from living twenty years in China, where Mr. Wilson had held some governmental post. Somehow, this seemed to me to give them a little distinction; China might provide something to talk about; something out of the ordinary run. Oliver and Joanna were asked to come in after dinner.

All the preparations for the evening put me in a state of nerves. I was terrified all day lest I should be kept late at the office. As it happened, I was able to leave early, and reached home at six o'clock. I spent the next hour in bringing armfuls of my more interesting-looking books down from my own study, and putting them around the drawing-room in twos and threes on the occasional tables. I had bought the *Athenæum* and the *New Statesman* on my way home, and left those lying about, as well. I kept going out into the hall and then coming into the room, trying to gauge the impression it would make on Bruce and Rita, feeling ashamed of the gilt, Louis Seize furniture, the marble statue of the girl nursing a wounded dove that stood in the window, and the water-colours on the walls. There was an argument about cocktails. I thought we ought to have them, but neither my mother nor I, nor any of the maids, were very clear about how they should be made. Mother decided on Dubonnet, and we had another argument, in which I lost my temper, over whether it should be iced, and, if so, whether it should be shaken. I insisted on yellow chartreuse being served after dinner.

And then, at seven o'clock, Bruce telephoned. Rita, he said, was ill and could not come; something she had eaten seemed to have poisoned her; he was calling from

her flat and would come without her, but he was afraid that it was too late for him to get back to his hotel and dress. Might he just come as he was? For all that I had not wanted Rita, I was disappointed, and Mother was annoyed at the necessity for rearranging the table, and for keeping dinner and the Wilsons waiting for Bruce to arrive.

"Something she ate!" she said, scornfully. "I don't believe it."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What I say. You don't find out at seven o'clock that something you ate has disagreed with you. And getting *him* to ring up. I never heard of such a thing."

"What do you think it means, then?"

"I don't know. If they were an engaged couple, I would say they had had a tiff."

An enormous vista of speculation opened in my mind, broken by the arrival of Mother's friends, the Wilsons. We sat with our iced Dubonnet until ten minutes to eight, when Bruce arrived. He was full of apologies, and seemed oddly unlike himself, stammering rather more than usual, and looking a little flushed in the face. Mother made polite but chilly enquiries about Rita. The diagnosis appeared to be shrimps. Then we went in to dinner.

It was an uncomfortable meal. I was nervous, anxious for Bruce to be at his best and make a good impression; I tried to draw him out, but he refused at first to be drawn. He ate practically nothing, dragging his food around the plate and then pushing the plate from him, but he drank glass after glass of wine, keeping Grace, the parlourmaid, perpetually at his shoulder. Mother, irritated to begin with, and angry at this slight to the dinner, which was good, had turned into someone whom I did not know. The Wilsons were obviously aware of something being

wrong behind the scenes, and as obviously trying to hide their awareness. After his fourth glass of claret, Bruce began to relax, but he relaxed too much. He became talkative, as though conscious of obligation. I encouraged him. He told us about the house he had found in the South of France; he told again of the bargain he and his wife had made about the children's education. Mrs. Wilson looked startled.

"Will they go to school in France?" she asked.

"No."

"Will you have a tutor for them?"

"I shall tutor them myself. They've been to public school in Chicago up till now . . ."

"Public school?" Mr. Wilson asked. "Surely they're too young for a public school?"

"Not your kind of public school. Public school in America means free school. I believe you call them council schools or board schools over here."

"Oh, how odd." I could see that Mrs. Wilson was a little shocked. "Is that usual in America?"

"Quite."

"You mean the children all go to school together . . . all classes, I mean all social classes? Aren't you afraid . . ."

"Afraid of what?"

"Well, that they might catch things."

"They have caught things. Practically everything they could catch. Measles, mumps, whooping cough."

"Yes, but I meant . . . I meant other things. And habits. Bad habits."

"All children have bad habits," Bruce replied.

Mother stepped in, to ease the situation.

"Do they like the idea of going to live in France?" she asked.

Bruce turned to her.

"No, as a matter of fact, I don't think they do," he said.

"I think I'm going to have quite a time with them. To begin with, my wife's brought them up to be tough. That was her theory. My job is going to be the softening process."

"It seems rather hard on the children," said Mr. Wilson.

"Maybe, but it'll be easier than it would the other way around."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, if they'd been brought up soft, the way I was, and then had to take the toughening afterwards. That seems to be the English system."

"Oh?" said Mr. Wilson, enquiringly.

"To bring a child up to be a mother's darling until it's eight or ten, and then pitchfork it into the hive of brutality that *you* call a public school."

"I think that's a little bit of an overstatement." Mr. Wilson was trying to be courteous.

"Surely you and your wife could have agreed on some half-way measure, if you had such opposed views on education?" Mrs. Wilson said.

"My wife and I couldn't agree on anything," said Bruce, amiably. "In the beginning, anyway. That's why we made this arrangement."

Mrs. Wilson looked down at her plate.

"It seems a pity that your children should have to suffer for your incompatibility," she said chillily.

"Children always suffer for their parents' incompatibility. And their ignorance. Mine suffer from it by being there at all. We should never have had them. We never meant to. At least, the first one was an accident. Then we thought it might be a little less miserable if it had a fellow sufferer, so we had Kate."

"But why should it be miserable?" asked Mrs. Wilson.

"Because my wife and I were the kind of people that we were."

I could see that the conversation was making the Wilsons uncomfortable. Gentlemen did not admit that they were unhappy with their wives.

"If you were as unsuited as that," Mrs. Wilson said, trying to be bright about it, "how was it that you stayed married? I always understood America was the land of divorces."

"I needed my wife too badly. Or, rather, I needed a woman in my life too badly. That was my mother's fault."

"Oh?" Complete non-comprehension here. I grew nervous, watching Bruce warming to his subject.

"My mother brought me up to think she was the Virgin Mary." He waved aside the dish of ice-cream that Grace was offering him. "And that my father had raped her; and that I was the result. Consequently, my whole life should be spent in atoning to her for it."

"Are you sure you won't have some ice-cream?" Mother interrupted.

"No, thanks." Bruce was in his stride now. "She also made me believe that no woman could ever contemplate sex except as a kind of outrage, so that I grew up thoroughly ashamed of any ideas I had in that direction. It was a miracle that I didn't turn into a homo. I very nearly did. I was always falling in love with husky members of the football team when I was at school, only I was such a puny little rat in those days that none of them would look at me. Then by a miracle, when I was eighteen, a married woman seduced me."

Even I knew by now that he had gone too far. I saw my mother eating her ice-cream in large spoonfuls, anxious to get it out of the way so that the ladies could leave the table. Mrs. Wilson was paddling hers with her

spoon. I heard the front door-bell ring, and knew that it was Oliver and Joanna, arriving too early. I heard Grace show them into the drawing-room. Meanwhile, Bruce was going on.

"It was an incredible liberation. I thought at first she must be a wicked or abnormal woman, because she enjoyed it. But after a couple more experiments, I decided that my mother had been wrong. Until I met my wife. She set me right back again."

I knew now, with panic-stricken certainty, that he was going to start the story of his sex relations with his wife, which he had told me at Simpson's, and I knew that it would not make good hearing. Mrs. Markham had apparently been sexually frigid and hysterical for the first two years of their life together. I sat fascinated and helpless, unable to stop him. But Mother, who perhaps guessed the sort of thing that was coming, broke in to say: "I think I heard Oliver and Joanna arriving. We're a little late. I think perhaps we should go in to them." She glanced at Mrs. Wilson. "If you have finished?"

"Oh, quite . . . quite." Mrs. Wilson rose eagerly.

"I'll send Oliver in to you," Mother said to me as they left.

It was the first time in my life that I had been left in charge of the men after dinner. I was not quite sure of the ritual. I believed dirty stories to be in order, but somehow, despite his frank talk, I could not connect Bruce with dirty stories, either telling them or enjoying listening to them. I offered the cigars. Oliver came in, wearing a dinner-jacket, and looking, I thought, strange and stuffed and solemn in it. It did not occur to me that I might look like that to him, in mine. He took a cigar. I had never seen him smoke one before. Grace came in with the coffee and liqueurs.

Conversation hung fire for a little. Mr. Wilson also

appeared to think that stories were the correct thing. He told one, with some preliminary warning and apology; it concerned a cure for constipation. Bruce smiled politely, unamused. Oliver, not to be outdone, told a dirtier one, and bungled the point. I was embarrassed. Bruce looked at the end of his cigar, and then drained his yellow chartreuse at a gulp. Oliver told another story, with some French in it, this time. I rose to get the bottle to refill Bruce's glass. Mr. Wilson started wiping his glasses on his handkerchief. Oliver knew that he was on the wrong tack, but could not stop. He told another story. Bruce looked up.

"Why do you do that?" he asked.

"What?"

"Tell that kind of story. You don't really think they're funny. You can't."

"Why not?" asked Oliver politely, angry at the rebuff, but trying to be grown-up about it.

"There's nothing funny about sex. It's no more a subject for humour than digestion or religion."

"Do you put those all on the same plane?" Mr. Wilson enquired.

Bruce laughed. "No," he said. "I think digestion is far more important. A good evacuation's the most important thing in the world. As a matter of fact, your religion depends on it."

"And how do you make that out?"

Bruce took another swallow of chartreuse.

"If you have good bowel movements you don't need religion. One's a substitute for the other. Mystics are only people with chronic constipation."

Mr. Wilson laughed politely. "That is certainly an original theory."

"I wouldn't have called it that," said Bruce. "I would have said it was the oldest in the world. *M-mens sana in*

corpore sano," he stammered over the quotation. "What else does that mean? A healthy mind in a healthy body. No one with a healthy mind ever thought about God."

"Oh, come," said Mr. Wilson.

"No one with a good digestive tract and a satisfactory sex life. Why should he? The trouble is, almost nobody has either, nowadays. That's the curse of our modern civilisation."

I saw Oliver beginning to be impressed. He had not lost his contempt for God, and despite the personal attack with which the argument had opened I could see him starting to like Bruce.

"Hence God," Oliver said, and then added, by way of quotation from another dirty story, "hence the pyramids."

"Hence a lot of things," Bruce replied. "Hence the kind of stories you were telling. You wouldn't think sex funny if you had enough of it."

Oliver made an effort to extreme sophistication.

"Is there?" he asked.

"I guess so. There's too much, so I guess there's enough. Too much sex, too much digestion; dissipation and diarrhœa. The only thing there's not too much of is drink." He held out his glass to me to be replenished. I saw Mr. Wilson look at his watch.

By the time we joined the ladies, Bruce had made a complete convert of Oliver, who was grinning broadly. In the drawing-room Mother and Mrs. Wilson were sitting stiffly in little gilt arm-chairs on either side of the fire. Joanna, looking bored, was curled up, in what I was sure Mother thought an unladylike attitude, in a corner of the sofa, smoking a cigarette. She looked up as we came in.

"You've been a very long time," she said, brightly.

"We've been having a very interesting conversation," said Oliver.

"Well, then, let's share it. We need it in here," Joanna replied.

"I'm sorry you've been bored," said Mother.

"I didn't mean that," Joanna said quickly. "But we were getting to a bit of a standstill, weren't we? Women always do, by themselves. There ought to be a time limit after dinner."

"A very good idea," said Mrs. Wilson, smiling.

I introduced Bruce to Joanna, and he sat down beside her.

"What was your conversation about?" Mother asked.

"I hardly think it was a kind to continue in here," Mr. Wilson said.

"Oh, come on," said Joanna, "it can't have been as bad as that. What was it?"

"It was about religion," Oliver said.

"Golly, and I thought men told dirty stories after dinner. What's there to say about religion that we can't hear? It's a pure enough subject, isn't it?"

"I don't think it's a very good drawing-room topic," Mrs. Wilson said.

"No," said Joanna, sharply. "Nothing interesting ever is." She threw her cigarette bad-temperedly at the fire, and missed it, scrambling to her feet and rescuing it from the rug.

It was now half-past nine. For half an hour Mother encouraged the Wilsons to talk about China, having first made sure that Bruce had never been there. At ten o'clock Grace brought in a tray of drinks. Mother looked at them nervously.

"Will you do the honours, Edward?" she said to me.

I handed glasses of lemon squash to the ladies, and whisky and soda to Bruce and Mr. Wilson. I glanced enquiringly at Oliver.

"Whisky, please," he said firmly.

"I say!" said Joanna. "We are going it." Then she turned to Bruce. "Father doesn't like Oliver to drink," she explained. "We've been having trouble about it at home."

"That's one thing my kids won't have trouble about," Bruce said. "I shall probably have trouble getting them to drink enough. I can't make up my mind whether it's better to start feeding it to them now, to give them the taste, or forbid it to them so that they'll find it more attractive."

"You're not serious?" Mrs. Wilson said.

"I am," Bruce answered. "If you knew a way of giving your children freedom from every kind of strain, worry or inhibition, wouldn't you want them to have it, and as much of it as they could get? Do you realise what there is in a glass of whisky? *This* glass of whisky?" He held his drink up to the light. "Potentially, liberation from every trouble that all the philosophers and priests and psycho-analysts have been trying to find solutions for since the world began. Confucius, Spinoza and Freud, all in one quick gulp." He took a large swallow.

"It sounds like Communion wine," laughed Joanna. "Transubstantiation, or something."

"Joanna, really!' my mother protested.

"You're dead right," said Bruce. "That's exactly what it is. Communion wine. Communion with every saint and every sinner, with every thinker and every artist and musician who has ever realised the infinity of the human spirit." He raised his glass again, looking at it. "Shelley and Beethoven and Michelangelo, too," he said, and drank again.

"You could use the same argument to defend drug-taking," my mother said.

"I guess you could," Bruce answered. "Except that there's nothing convivial about drugs."

"Oh, I don't know," Joanna said flippantly. "What about opium dens? They sound rather cosy."

"This conversation is getting silly." My mother snubbed her, to put an end to it.

"We must be going." The Wilsons rose.

"Oh, it's early yet," my mother pleaded, insincerely.

"I know, but we have a long way to go. All the way to Blackheath." Mrs. Wilson gathered up her scarf and bag. I saw Bruce looking at his watch.

"Please don't go yet," I urged. "Have another drink. Some more Confucius."

"Well, all right." He passed me his glass. "A little more Confucius and less soda this time."

I went to the door with the Wilsons. When I came back, Bruce and Joanna were talking about Chicago and the stockyards. She was excited to find that he knew Upton Sinclair, who was one of the authors she admired. He gave me his glass again, and I refilled it. Oliver was now on his third drink, too. He pulled his chair close to Bruce's, and, by referring back to the inclusion of Beethoven in the list of whisky ingredients, drew the conversation around to music. Soon they were discussing Beethoven quartets, which Bruce said contained the sum of human wisdom.

"They're better than whisky," he said. "They're good brandy. The best brandy."

They began finding alcoholic equivalents for the various composers. Brahms, they decided, was Burgundy; Chopin was Champagne; Mozart was Rhine wine; Bach was . . .

"Bach's pure spirit," Bruce said, rising. "And I must go home."

This time my mother made no protest. I went to call a taxi. Bruce and Oliver stood in the hall, with Oliver trying to keep up the musician game, worrying it like a

bone. I was pleased that he should so obviously like Bruce, but their talking music made me feel left out, and I could not resist a slight pleasure in realising that Oliver had started to bore him with his persistence. He was still trying to find a beverage for Debussy when the taxi arrived.

"Can I give anyone a lift?" Bruce asked.

"We go as far as the corner," Oliver said.

The three of them got into the cab, and I watched it drive off. Then I returned to the drawing-room, where my mother was tidying up. I helped her for a moment in silence, feeling suddenly a little frightened.

"Is he often like that?" Mother asked.

"He's always *rather* like that," I answered, with complete innocence of her meaning. "He was a little strange to-night, though."

"He was drunk," said my mother.

"Oh, no!" Astonishingly, I had not realised it.

"Of course he was. He was drunk when he came, and he got drunker. I don't know what the Wilsons can have thought."

I stared at her.

"Do you really think . . .?" I said.

"I don't 'think'; I know. I wouldn't be surprised if he were a chronic dipsomaniac. That's probably why Rita didn't come, because she saw the condition he was in. I can't blame her. The only pity is that she didn't persuade *him* to stay away, too."

"It wouldn't have been much of an evening if *neither* of them had come," I said.

"It wasn't much of an evening, as it was. I hope never to spend another like it. Now, put out the lights, and we'll go to bed."

I followed Mother up the stairs, feeling both foolish and alarmed. Why hadn't I realised that Bruce was

drunk? I wondered if he had been drunk on any of the other occasions when I had seen him. Was Mother right, and could he really be a dipsomaniac? I had believed in him so completely, taken everything he said for gospel. So, for that matter, it would seem, had Oliver and Joanna to-night. Did they know he was drunk, or had they been taken in, too? Oh, when was I going to learn about people! Was there no one I could depend on, no one who, to use a phrase of Bruce's, "knew all the answers"? I supposed there was my mother, but that wasn't the same thing. That wasn't what I wanted. I kissed her good-night at her door, and went to my room perplexed and discouraged. My world had rocked a little, and it had left me still rocking.

Chapter Eight

(1)

"I GUESS I OWE YOU AN EXPLANATION OF LAST NIGHT," Bruce said.

We were in his suite at the Carlton Hotel. He had telephoned me at the office during the morning, and asked if I would have a drink with him that afternoon. He stood now in front of the coal fire, with a glass of whisky in his hand. His face had a ravaged look.

"You must have realised that something was wrong. You probably guessed that Rita wasn't really sick." I nodded, waiting for the explanation. "But she was in no state to come out to dinner, either. I don't think I was, myself, but at least I hadn't been crying all afternoon, the way she had. She couldn't have come out, looking as she did. She hadn't any eyes left at all, poor darling."

"What had she been crying about?" I asked.

"Us," said Bruce shortly. He turned and walked away to the window. "You may be surprised to hear that I think we're going to be married."

"Married?"

"I think so. Eventually. If my wife will give me a divorce. I'm going home to ask her."

"Are you in love with Rita?"

"Yes, I am. It's been sneaking up on me. All the time I was away I kept seeing her in front of me, getting larger and smaller, like Alice in Wonderland. Big Rita, and Little Rita. I couldn't get her out of my head. I didn't

intend to do anything about it, though, until yesterday. Until I found she felt the same about me, only worse, if possible. That settled it. We've spent the entire last forty-eight hours alternating between bed and arguing it out, in her apartment. This is the first time I've been in this place since Tuesday; practically, since I arrived."

I lost myself for a moment watching a series of pictures of the two of them, in various stages of intimacy and undress in Rita's flat, passing before me as though coins were being dropped in a slot machine in the amusement gallery of my head. With an effort, I averted my mind from them to listen to what he was saying.

"I went back there after I left your house. We kept it up until five this morning, and started again at nine. I need some sleep. I'll sleep the whole way over, if Alice in Wonderland doesn't start again."

"Do you think your wife *will* give you a divorce?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so. It'll cost me quite a bit, but I think so. We discussed it often enough in the beginning of our marriage, and in the adjustment period. It's something that I thought the danger of was past, but apparently I was wrong. I think I can make my wife see it."

"What about your children?"

"Yes, that's the snag. I've got to have them. I've got to have those next five years. That was the bargain. I don't see how she can deny them to me, after that. If she does, then . . . well, then, I'll have to give up Rita. Or we'll have to stay as we are. That's what the trouble was about; my telling her that."

"You mean, your children are more important to you?"

"I guess so, ultimately. I don't know. If she faced me down, made me choose between them and her, I don't know what I'd do. If I gave them up for her, I'd come to

hate her, for making me. I told her that. God, I shouldn't do this! I know I shouldn't."

He sat down, suddenly, shaking now. For a moment I thought that he, too, was going to cry.

"Shouldn't do what?" I asked.

"Contemplate this whole thing at all. Get myself into jams like this. I had my life worked out exactly as I wanted it, and this has to happen."

"But why have you got to marry her?" I asked, feeling myself very grown-up and sophisticated to be talking so, and to Bruce of all people. "Why can't you . . . just go on as you are?"

"God knows," he answered. "Because she won't, except maybe in the final case of its meaning my losing the kids. And then only maybe. She won't say. She wants to be married. It's not much of a life she has, the way it is now, and it's not going to get any better. I know that, and she knows it, too, deep down, for all her talk about making good as a playwright. That won't happen. Or it may; I don't know; you never know with the theatre; you seem to be able to get by with almost nothing, on a lucky break. But she can't count on it, and she knows it. She's scared; scared of the years ahead, and I can't blame her. It's now or never for her; for marriage, I mean. In another ten years she'll be over forty, still grubbing along in some messy little apartment, writing her bits of criticism, if anyone will still give her a job, sleeping around, probably with men younger than herself, by then. And as my mistress, even if it were a permanent thing, it's no position for her. She hasn't what it takes to stand up to it."

Again I lost myself, this time in his picture of Rita's life, so different from the way in which I had seen it. He made it sound so shabby and precarious. Perhaps it was, compared with his own. I looked around me at the room,

and realised how different were our standards; a private sitting-room at the Carlton was something outside the range of my experience. It stood to me for the ultimate in luxury, costing, I knew, about four pounds a day; to Bruce, it was the normal way of living when away from home. Rita had lived like that once, too, but it was a long time ago; besides, she had assured me that she found her present mode of life a happier one. I tried to tell Bruce this.

"That's what she tells herself," he said. "It isn't true. It's an act that she puts on, to kid herself with. She knows it is, too, in her worst moments. She's been having some of her worst moments this week, and, boy, are they bad! But, still, that isn't the point. The point is that we're in love with each other, god damn it. We want each other, all the time."

I made another effort to be wise and adult.

"Are you sure it's love?" I asked. "Are you sure it isn't just sex?"

"Of course I'm not sure," he answered, almost angrily. "One's never sure. But suppose it is, what difference does that make? Whichever it is, we want each other. I've had some experience of sex in my time, and so has she. Nothing has ever got either of us like this before. Sex is as good a reason for getting married as any. Better. Sex will hold two people together better than anything."

"While it lasts," I put in, still feeling that I was doing rather well.

"Sure, while it lasts. What the hell? Besides, I'm the kind of guy that sex does last with. I've never got tired of a woman yet. I don't go in for promiscuity. Look, I know Rita's no intellectual giant. In many ways she's a god-damned fool. But she's feminine, and attractive, and she likes *me*. I told you what that did to me, in any woman

who liked me even a little. When it's a woman like Rita, who likes me a hell of a lot, who wants me as badly as I want her and is willing to show it . . . who'll feel as badly as she does about the idea of our losing each other . . . well, then I'm grateful to have found her, and I don't let go. That doesn't come very often in anyone's life, and certainly not in mine. I told you I was shy. Sexually, that's an understatement, a hell of an understatement. The idea of being rebuffed is something that . . . well, that I would never expose myself to."

"You seemed awfully sure of yourself with Rita, before it happened," I said.

"Listen, I've lived long enough to know a high-sign when I get it. But that doesn't mean I'm not grateful for it. I told you I was raised to think sex was disgusting to women. Well, I've never gotten over that, quite. And when I find a woman who lets me know that she likes it with me, and with whom it's as good as it is with her . . ." He broke off. "Oh hell, why go on about it? She happens to be the goddam best bed partner I've ever had, or that I'm ever likely to have. And they don't come very often. To me, anyway. Have another drink." He refilled his own glass.

"No, thanks. I must go home. I shall be late for dinner." I rose.

"Well, thanks for listening. And I'm sorry about last night. I can't remember much about it, but I don't think I can have been the best company."

"Were you drunk?" I had been longing to ask that, but had thought I would not have the opportunity.

"No. I'd had a lot to drink, but I wasn't drunk. I'm never drunk. I never have been drunk, but I've always drunk plenty. I don't know how I'd have gotten through this week without drink. No, I wasn't drunk, but I just

wasn't there, most of the time. I was seeing Big Rita and Little Rita, lying across her bed stark naked, crying her eyes out, half the evening. She kept on getting in the way of the centrepiece on the dinner-table. I sent your mother flowers, by the way."

We shook hands at the door.

"I'll write you," he said. "And look, you might go and see Rita now and then, and let me know how you think she's doing. I know you're sore at her because of something she said about your work. Don't be. She doesn't know what she's talking about. Don't hold it against her. Go and see her for me."

"Yes, of course," I said, enormously flattered by the commission. "Am I supposed to know what you've told me?"

"I don't know. No, I guess not. I guess I'd better not have told you anything. Maybe she will. If not, well, just play dumb about it. But write to me about her. You're the only one who can. I don't know anyone else who knows her. And I'll let you know what happens. I'll be back before long anyway, I guess. Good-bye." He put his arm around me as we walked to the lift. "It's been swell knowing you. And go on writing. I don't mean 'writing to *me*', I mean writing."

The clock in the hall of the hotel said five past seven as I left. Dinner at home was at half-past. I took a taxi, and did not notice the twenty minutes' drive, so spinning was my head with what I had been hearing. I needed hours to get it all sorted out. Each time that I tried to do so on the way home, my thoughts were interrupted by the same vivid, almost pornographic pictures that had assailed me while Bruce was talking. Those, and his casual remark implying that Rita had had a lot of sexual experience, were what were uppermost in my mind. I came into our house to find the downstairs rooms filled with giant chry-

santhemums, white and yellow and bronze. Bruce had sent my mother two dozen of them.

"He obviously knew how badly he behaved," Mother said. "He sent me some roses, too. They came from Solomon's, in Piccadilly. They must have cost a fortune at this time of year. Rita rang up, too, to say she was better and how sorry she was about last night. I still think I was right about why she didn't come. What makes you so late to-night?"

I did not tell her. Sitting opposite to her all that evening in the morning-room, with my law-book open on my lap and paying it no attention, I tried to imagine what she would say if I were to repeat to her even a small part of Bruce's conversation. For one frightened moment it seemed as though my face must be giving away the thoughts that were racing behind it.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

I started.

"Nothing. Why?"

"You look so far away. You haven't looked at your book for about ten minutes. Are you worried about anything?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, what is it, then?"

"I tell you, it's nothing. I was just thinking. I don't know what about."

She looked at me suspiciously, and then shrugged her shoulders, returning to her novel. I knew that I had hurt her, seeming to be secretive. I sat on, trying to pretend that I was working, trying to guard my face and my expression. Presently, I laid my book aside.

"I'm going for a walk," I said.

Outside, it was cold and damp, but walking around the blocks of houses, down the silent, empty, long suburban roads, I could at least let my thoughts off their leash. My

hour with Bruce had been the most disturbing and the most exciting that I had ever lived through. No one had ever talked to me like that before. I had encountered reality at last, adult reality, and had been admitted to it as a confidant on equal terms. It was not only exciting, it was flattering, immensely flattering. I had come out of the confines of my home and of my inexperience to catch a glimpse, at least, of a quite different world, and the glimpse had intoxicated me. My pulses were still beating with it. And I had a secret. Bruce had not said that it was that, but quite obviously I should keep it so. I knew better than my mother. I knew that she was wrong in her diagnosis of what had kept Rita away. And wrong about Bruce being drunk, too. My faith in him had been vindicated. I had a new vision of Rita, based on knowledge that was mine alone. I felt as though my whole world were bursting at the seams. Now, I told myself, now I have really grown up, now that I have been told something like this. I felt almost as though I had had my first sexual experience.

(2)

Two days later, I told Oliver. I could not keep the burden and the excitement of my knowledge to myself, nor the puzzlement, the confusion of principles and judgments: that I found when I tried to analyse and digest it. I needed someone to share it all and to discuss it with. I knew that I was being disloyal to the spirit of Bruce's confidence; I knew that I was losing something in renouncing my sole ownership of it, and that I was taking a risk in selecting Oliver to tell it to, the risk of an unsympathetic response; but I could not help myself. I always had told him everything; I had to tell him this, too.

I waited to do so until he had first told me how much he had liked Bruce, how charming and intelligent he had found him. I hoped by then that he had committed himself too far to be able to retreat to disapproval. For a moment, but a moment only, he tried to assume a casual air about it; after that, he was as intrigued as I was. The only difference between our attitudes was that in his there was nothing but complete acceptance. I, on reflection, had let myself be teased by doubts as to whether there were not something reprehensible about the whole thing. It was not the adultery that shocked me, but a feeling of something uncontrolled and fevered in the conduct of the affair. I told myself that all the great romances of literature and history must have been the same, but, try as I would, I could not see Bruce and Rita in the roles of Romeo and Juliet, or Tristan and Isolde. Contemporary love affairs, I felt, should not be like that. Besides, this wasn't love—at any rate, as I conceived it; Romeo could never have talked of Juliet as Bruce had talked of Rita. Doubts of her worthiness of him merged into doubts of his own complete worthiness as a person. Oliver swept all these aside, and I was grateful to have him do so. The affair for him was an enhancement of the glamour with which Rita always, and Bruce recently, had been surrounded, and I accepted his judgment as I had always done. My conception of love, he assured me, was romantic and sentimental; this was how grown men and women really behaved and felt about each other; this was what passion was really like. I was proud to have been its confidant, and felt, too, that I had risen in Oliver's estimation by so being.

There remained my visit to Rita, and I was not sure how to set about arranging it. I telephoned her and asked if I might come and see her, and she was evasive, saying that she was very busy, but would telephone me in a few

days. A week or more passed without her doing so. I rang her again; she was apologetic, though I thought rather perfunctorily so; she had meant to telephone, but life had been so rushed; she was collaborating on a play; when did I want to come? I arranged for the following Saturday, and thought, as I went, how very different was my mood from the one in which I had gone on that earlier Saturday afternoon, two or three months before. Then I had been filled with eagerness and excitement; now only a sense of pride in my capacity of emissary or ambassador, in being entrusted with a mission that demanded some degree of diplomacy and *savoir faire*, served to mitigate the reluctance with which I set out on the bus.

The visit was not a comfortable one. I did not know what to talk about, and it seemed to me as though Rita were waiting for me to begin, marking time as one does with social preliminaries when there is business to be discussed later on. Only, I did not know what the business was. So palpable, however, was her sense of waiting that I began to wonder whether Bruce after all had told her that I knew. I wished I could find out.

"Have you heard from Bruce?" I asked.

"Yes, he wrote me from the boat," she answered. "He had such a nice evening at your house. I was so sorry I couldn't come. But I was so ill. Such pains."

So he had not told her; the lie was still intact. Then what was she waiting for? I found myself staring at her, trying to see traces of her recent experience in her face. I averted my eyes, and they encountered a divan spread with cushions, which started my imagination racing again in the sexual direction. I pulled it back. I asked her about the play on which she had said she was collaborating.

"I'm doing it with a friend of mine, a novelist. Louise Orme. I don't know whether you know her books at all."

I did. In those days I read at least three novels a week, mostly in the train and over bad lunches in City restaurants. I had read two by Louise Orme; they dealt with a gay and colourful though rather raffish set of young Bohemians in studios and on the fringes of the theatre in London; I had enjoyed them and been pricked with envy for the life they pictured. I knew her, too, as an actress whom I had seen very occasionally in small parts at a repertory theatre near my home. She was a tall, ugly girl with protruding eyes and a thick voice. Oliver and Joanna used to make fun of her whenever she appeared, and we all wondered how she managed to get parts.

"Lulu adores the theatre. She's written a couple of plays of her own, but she doesn't know anything about construction, so she's providing the plot and the characters, and I'm contributing the technique." Rita laughed as she said that, as though to indicate that I was not to take her seriously. "She acts herself, sometimes."

"I've seen her at the 'Barn'," I said.

"Yes, her uncle runs it. She does quite well with her books, you know, and I think her name on a play ought to mean something. I think we ought to get it accepted."

"Would she be in it?" I asked.

"Perhaps. I don't know. Not the lead, of course, but perhaps in one of the smaller parts. I know her uncle would put it on like a shot, if she was in it, but I think we can do better than the 'Barn'."

Envy and admiration started to surge up in me again.

"Have you written anything since I saw you?" she asked.

"Yes, I've written a couple of things." I affected casualness, not wanting to get drawn into any more of that.

"Did you bring them with you?"

"No." My surprise at her question was quite genuine.

"Oh, I thought . . . I thought . . ." She checked herself, in slight confusion. "I don't know why, but I imagined that was why you asked yourself to-day. I thought you were going to bring me something to read."

So that was the explanation, not only of her air of expectancy, but of her unwillingness to see me. That was why she had put me off. I stiffened with hurt vanity.

"No," I said. "I haven't brought anything. You don't like my work."

She looked up quickly.

"Oh!" she said. "You're hurt. I hurt you with the things I said."

I was furious with myself for letting that become apparent.

"Not at all," I said, loftily. "But there didn't seem much point in bringing anything more."

"I was only trying to help," she said. "I just thought you were writing the wrong kind of thing, that's all. If you want to be successful, that is."

"I write what I feel," I said, rather pompously. "If it's not what the public wants, well, I can't help that."

"It's silly to despise the public," she said gently.

"Bruce doesn't think so," I threw back.

Again she gave me a quick look, but this time I thought that I saw anger in it.

"That's rather a different thing," she said quietly.

"Why?" I asked, truculently.

"Because Bruce happens to be something of a genius."

That floored me for a moment. I had no wish to belittle Bruce.

"You're not comparing yourself with *him*, are you?" she went on.

"No, of course not," I said, crossly.

"Well, then . . ."

"*He* didn't talk like that about my writing, though. He thought it showed promise."

"I never said that it didn't."

"No, but you didn't exactly encourage me. Bruce did. He wrote me a very nice letter about it."

"Bruce is a very kind person," she said.

"He's a good critic," I replied. "I think he's probably a better critic than he is a creative artist," I added, quoting Oliver.

"What makes you think that?"

"I don't know. I just think so. His novel, and . . ."

"Didn't you like his novel?"

I was caught there. I had not meant to say or to imply that. I wished that I had read his book on Proust, so that I could claim to like that better, in support of my dictum about his criticism, which I wished now that I had not made.

"Yes, I . . . I liked it, rather," I stammered. "I found it a bit hard to read."

"It's a very fine book," she said, speaking slowly, and spacing out her words, as though I were a rather stupid or naughty child. "But Bruce is an American. He doesn't understand the English taste."

"His novel wasn't very popular in America," I said. "It didn't sell."

"How do you know that?" she asked sharply.

"He told me so."

That seemed to deflate her for a moment. She shifted her ground.

"And do you want *your* things not to sell?" she asked.

"That's got nothing to do with it," I replied. "We weren't talking about that. I just said I thought he was a better critic than he was a writer."

"Because he was nice about your work?"

I saw no way to answer that, and keep my temper.

"Don't *you* think he's a good critic?" I asked.

"We're not discussing Bruce," she said.

I had a sudden intuition that he might have criticised her writing, and unfavourably, and that that might account for the irritation I could see rising in her. I was young enough and angry enough to allow myself to smile.

"What are you smiling at?" she asked.

I wiped the smile from my face.

"I wasn't smiling," I replied.

"Did Bruce talk to you about me?" she asked.

"No," I said, and then spoiled it by adding: "How do you mean?"

"Did he talk about my writing?"

"I don't think so."

"What did he say to you about me?"

"He didn't say anything."

"He must have said *something*."

"I think he said he liked you."

I could see her searching my face. I reached for another piece of cake, and did my best to look innocent as I ate it. She appeared to be satisfied, and changed the subject, asking after Oliver and Joanna.

"I haven't seen either of them for such a long time. I haven't done anything about Joanna. Is she still as unhappy at home?"

"Yes, I think more so. She and her stepmother seem to quarrel every time I see them together. Joanna gets quite rude to her."

"Oh dear, I must ring her up. I really must. Wait a minute, I've got an idea. There's a new Galsworthy play next week. Do you think she'd like to come to that?"

"I'm sure she would."

"I'll ring her up now, before I forget."

While she was at the telephone a fear came to me.

Would she write and tell Bruce that I had not liked his novel? If, as I suspected, she were jealous of his praise of me, it seemed to me she might revenge herself by telling him I did not like his work. How could I protect myself against that? I would have to write and tell him what I *had* said, confess that I had found him hard to read. Oh dear, what a fool I was to have said anything. Out of my contemplation of the trouble I had involved myself in, I heard Rita talking to Joanna.

"Edward's here, having tea with me. We were just talking about you. I wondered if you'd like to come to the new Galsworthy play with me on Friday."

Damn, I thought. Why did she want to say that about our having talked of her? Now Joanna would ask me what we had said. The very fact of Rita's ringing her up and inviting her would make her suspicious. Oh, why couldn't I learn to hold my tongue? Only, if I did, I asked myself, what would I ever talk about?

The front door-bell rang. Rita motioned from the telephone, indicating that I should answer it. I opened the door to a dumpy, middle-aged woman dressed in shabby brown, who was standing outside. She looked like somebody's cook.

"Is Miss Carlill at home?" she asked, in a voice that was faintly cockney.

"She's on the telephone," I said.

"Who's that?" Rita's voice called.

"Me. Carrie."

"Oh, come in."

I followed the little woman back into the sitting-room, where she sat down, taking off her gloves and looking at me with an odd intensity. She had a lined and crumpled-looking face, with burning dark eyes. Rita put down the telephone, introduced her as Mrs. Broome, and started to pour tea for her. I listened for a few moments to them

talking about the weather, and how nice a cup of tea was on a cold afternoon. Then I decided Mrs. Broome was not interesting, and relapsed into my own gloomy thoughts, wondering what I was going to tell Bruce in my letter. After a moment there was silence and I looked up to find the burning eyes fixed on me again.

"Who is this young man?" Mrs. Broome asked.

"Edward? I don't know how to explain him. Who are you, Edward?" Rita said, laughingly.

"I don't think I'm anyone," I answered, rather sulkily.

"What makes you ask?" Rita turned to her.

"There's success about him," Mrs. Broome replied, and then directed herself to me. "What do you do?" she asked.

"I work in the City. In a lawyer's office."

"Nothing artistic? Write, compose, paint?"

"I write a little."

She nodded.

"Well, you're going to do all right at it."

"Carrie's a psychic," Rita explained. "She can see all sorts of things. She's wonderful."

"Give me your hand," Mrs. Broome commanded. I obeyed. She took it, and looked at the palm a long time. "Oh, definitely," she said. "Look." She pointed out a line to Rita. "Not that I needed to look at his hand to know that. It's all round him, the minute you see him."

I could not help preening myself a little, though I knew that it was nonsense.

"What else can you tell about him?" Rita asked.

"He's going to be all right," Mrs. Broome answered, with a cook-like nod. "It may take him a little while. It probably will. But he's going to be all right." She took my hand again, but this time she merely held it, staring at me while she did so, and bringing her face closer to mine. Her breath was not pleasant.

"You've got brothers and sisters," she said. "*A* brother and sister."

"Only a brother," I said.

"About your own age."

"No, he's eight years older."

"Funny, I see a brother and sister. A brother of your own age, and your sister a bit younger. Very close to you."

"Perhaps she means Oliver and Joanna," Rita suggested.

"Who are they?"

"Cousins of mine. My best friends."

"Ah yes, that's it, then. Best friends, yes. I'll tell you something about yourself. You listen to them too much. You listen to everyone too much. Don't. You go your own way. Don't listen to anyone. You're lonely, aren't you?"

"A bit."

"Never mind. You won't be always. You'll have lots of friends. You're going to travel, too. You're going to be all right," she said.

I felt a little frightened and a little foolish, too, wondering whether to try and laugh it off, or ask for more. Then the bell rang again.

"Oh dear," Rita cried. "This flat's like Waterloo station."

Mrs. Broome released my hand as Rita went to the door.

"I can't tell you any more now," she said. "But you're all right. You'll do better than *she* ever will." She jerked her head after Rita. "Only, don't say I said so."

Rita came back, followed by Louise Orme. I had thought her an ugly girl when I had seen her on the stage, but close to, she was uglier still. She was extraordinarily dressed, in something shapeless and oriental, under a

hearthrug of a coat. Her hair was black and looped in heavy coils; she wore giant ear-rings, and a lot of hammered gold and silver jewellery with large, improbable-looking stones. She glanced at Mrs. Broome and me as Rita introduced us, and her glance summed us up as wholly unimportant. Her conversation made it quite obvious that she wished we were not there. But for all that, and for all that I had joined with Oliver and Joanna in making fun of her, I was glad to meet her. In those days it seemed as though I could never meet enough people. I kept a list of those I did meet, and looked forward to adding two more names to my list that night: Carrie Broome and Louise Orme. Besides, even if not a celebrity, she was someone in the public eye, someone that other people might have heard of, if they ever saw my list.

I took advantage of a lull in the conversation to tell her I had read her books.

"Ah, my public, my public," she cried, mockingly. "Well, I hope you liked them."

"I did, very much," I said. "I've seen you act, too."

"Better and better," she said. "Rita, who is this young man who follows my activities so closely?"

"We'll have to get you a label," Rita laughed to me. "Everyone's asking who you are. He wants to write," she explained to Miss Orme.

I did not care for the explanation, and glanced at Mrs. Broome, half hopeful that she might amplify it for me. But she was staring at the big, ugly girl as she had stared at me.

"*Do* you write?" Miss Orme asked me.

"A bit."

"Have you published anything?"

"Not yet. At least . . ." I caught myself.

"At least, what?"

"Well, I had something in *Punch*, not long ago." This was dangerous ground, and I knew it. I did not know whether I hoped that I would be asked what it had been, or that it would be passed over. Miss Orme passed it over. I glanced at Rita, but she was not paying attention. I wished I had been asked what it was. They probably thought it was a funny misprint from a newspaper that I had sent in, which *Punch* had printed.

Miss Orme began to talk. She told stories of the Barn Theatre, of actors, actresses and authors of her acquaintance, and all of her stories were either slightly scandalous or else built to some compliment that had been paid her, which she dismissed as soon as she had repeated it, with phrases like: "Of course, one doesn't pay any attention to that kind of thing, but it was nice of him to say it, I thought." Rita sat feeding her with cues and flattery; she obviously thought Miss Orme important, or else she was trying to show her off to us. Once or twice she interrupted a story to cry: "Lulu, you're marvellous!" but for the most part it was a monologue. Despite everything, I could not help being impressed by Lulu. She seemed to know so many famous, brilliant people; to have her finger in so many pies; to go to so many parties.

Presently Mrs. Eroome left, stopping, after her goodbyes to Lulu, to turn and say to Rita: "You two aren't right for each other."

"Lulu and me?" Rita cried in dismay. "Carrie, what *do* you mean?"

"You aren't right for each other. Vibrations all wrong. No good your working together. You'll see. Give it up. It's waste of time."

Then she went. Rita apologised profusely to Lulu.

"Don't take any notice of her," she said. "She's quite mad. She always does that kind of thing. It doesn't mean anything."

"What do you have her around for, then?" asked Lulu.

"I'm sorry for her," Rita answered. "And she amuses me. But I never pay any attention to what she says. You should have heard the stuff she was ladling out to Edward, here."

That was discouraging. I had already told myself that I did not believe it, but it had been nice to think that Rita did.

After Mrs. Broome's departure the talk flagged a little, as though they felt that an audience of one was not worth having. I saw Lulu beginning to fidget and Rita glancing at her watch, but I was loath to go.

"Look, Edward," Rita said, after a few minutes. "I'm most terribly sorry, but Lulu and I have got to work."

"Of course" I rose to my feet.

"It's been so nice seeing you," Rita said.

I shook hands with Lulu and went to the door.

"Have you any message for Bruce if I write to him?" I asked. The moment I had said it, it struck me as silly.

"No," Rita answered. "I don't think so."

On the way home I tried to compose my letter to him. What was I to say, apart from having to put myself right about his book? What was I to tell him? What did he want to know? He seemed suddenly so far away from all this. It was hard, looking back at the afternoon I had just spent, to visualise Rita as he had described her, lying stark naked across her bed, crying her eyes out. That was the Rita he wanted to know about; I could not tell him anything about her. All I could do was to describe the afternoon as it had been, doing my best to write it well, making a story of it, trying to draw conclusions and to sum up character. Mrs. Broome would make an amusing sketch. Should I tell him what she had said of me; or would that be conceited? Perhaps if I made fun of it, as

Rita had done, it might be permissible? "Of course one doesn't pay any attention to that kind of thing." Where had I heard that phrase quite recently? Oh, of course, it was Lulu, talking of the compliments that had been paid her. Was that why she used it, for the same reason that I would use it in writing to Bruce; because she wanted to repeat the compliments, and was afraid that it would sound immodest to do so? How genuine was her modesty? How genuine would mine be? I suddenly knew that it would not be genuine at all, and that I should not use the phrase. "Either tell him what she said and don't excuse yourself, or else don't tell it at all." Oddly, I could hear Joanna's voice telling me that. I knew that she would be right, but I knew, too, that I would not be able to help myself, that I was going to tell what Mrs. Broome had said about me, and that I would use a cover-phrase for it. I would not tell Oliver and Joanna, because they would laugh at me; I knew that, but I did not think that Bruce would laugh; not if I worded it carefully. I might even tell my mother, though I knew that she disliked and disapproved of fortune-tellers or anything tainted with the psychic. But perhaps the prophecy of good for me would make a difference. I thought that I could tell her. I only wished I knew for certain how much I believed in it, myself.

Chapter Nine

(1)

"WHAT DID YOU SAY TO RITA ABOUT ME?"

Joanna and I were walking on Hampstead Heath. It was Sunday morning, the day after I had been to tea with Rita, and I was going to lunch at the Winters'. Her question startled me, and I was aware of guilt beginning to mount.

"Nothing. Why?"

"Well, what made her ask me to go to the theatre with her? She never has, before. You must have said something. What was it?"

"It was nothing. Really, it was. We were just talking about you, and I said I didn't think you had a very good time . . ."

"What did you say that for?"

"Because I thought it was true. Isn't it?"

"Yes, it is, but what business was it of hers?"

"She was interested."

"So she's just being kind?"

"I don't know. No. Yes. I don't know. Supposing she is? Is that so awful?"

"I don't want her being sorry for me. If I'm unhappy at home, it's my own fault for not having the guts to get out. And being taken to the theatre by Rita isn't going to help."

"What did you say you'd go for, then?"

"She took me by surprise. Besides, it means one less

evening at home, and that's something. I suppose it does help a bit, really. And Thelma hates her. I thought it might annoy her."

"Did it?"

"I haven't told her yet. I thought I'd keep it. You know, it's awful being like that. But that's what it does to me. I spend half my time thinking of ways to irritate Thelma. And yet I'm sorry for her. I don't think she has much of a life, either. Was Daddy always like this? He never used to seem so. I thought for a time that that was because Mother was there, and that he was different when she was alive. She always used to tell us he was such a good man. I wonder if she believed it, or if she just wanted *us* to. I wonder if he wasn't always like this."

"Mother says he was." The moment I had said it, I knew that I should not have.

"Says he was what?"

"Well, selfish and . . . difficult," I stammered.

"Does she?" Joanna was interested. "I must ask her about him."

"No, don't," I said quickly.

"Why not?"

"Because I shouldn't have told you. She'll be angry with me for telling."

"Oh. How tiresome. Well, I won't say you've told me anything. I'll just ask her what he was like when he was young."

"I don't think she'll tell you."

"She doesn't like him, does she?"

"I don't know," I lied.

"It was Mother she was fond of. I'm beginning to feel awfully sorry for poor Mother. I think she must have had a terrible time. Isn't it funny that kids don't know? At least, I think I did know, really, but I wouldn't let myself. I don't believe I ever really liked Daddy, but I used to

think it was wicked not to. Do you know something? I've never told anyone to this day that I don't. I've never put it into words before."

"Not even to Oliver?"

"No, Oliver and I sort of dodge talking about it. I think we're afraid we might goad each other into doing something about it. Leaving home, or something. Oliver hasn't got much courage, you know. Though I don't know what right I've got to say that. I haven't either, or I'd have gone, ages ago."

"Well, why haven't you, if you feel like that?"

"I don't know. Too fond of my bed and bath, I expect. And because I'm afraid of the scene there would be. And of Daddy's shouting. I've told myself there were a lot of other reasons. That I was doing it for Oliver's sake. Or that Mother would have wanted me to stay. She would, too, but that's no reason for my sticking, now. She can't know anything about it any more."

"You don't think so?"

"What—that she can see?" I nodded. "No. Or if she can, then she must be able to see everything. Thelma, included. And she must know how I hate it all, and how impossible Daddy is." She turned to me suddenly. "Have you ever wanted anyone to die?" she asked.

"No, I don't think so."

"I used to want Thelma to die. Terribly. Until I realised that that would probably only make it worse, by leaving us alone with Daddy. Sometimes I wish they'd *both* die, and then I *know* I ought to get out, if I feel like that. I wish something would happen to push me."

It happened at lunch. We were in the middle of the roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, brussels sprouts and brown potatoes, when Mrs. Winter made a reference to some engagement for Friday night and what she wanted Joanna to wear.

"I can't," said Joanna. "I'm going to the theatre."

"You are? Who with?"

"Rita." She said it half-apologetically, instead of with the defiance she had led me to expect.

"You never told me."

"I only arranged it yesterday."

"Well, it's very annoying," said Mrs. Winter plaintively. "I wanted you there."

"Let her put it off, then," said Cousin Ben from the head of the table.

"I can't, Daddy."

"Why not? If your stepmother wants you to?"

"Because I've told Rita I'd go. And I don't like putting people off, once I've accepted."

"Yes, well, I don't like your going out with Rita, anyway. So you ring her up and tell her you can't come."

"No, Daddy," said Joanna.

"Rita won't mind," said Mrs. Winter. "She must have lots of other people she can take. She probably only asked you out of kindness or politeness, anyway."

"But suppose I want to go?" I could see Joanna's face hardening. I glanced at Oliver, and thought that he was looking frightened.

"I'd rather you didn't," Mrs. Winter said. "Your father's quite right. She's not a nice companion for you."

"You said that exactly as if I were three, and had brought the charwoman's daughter home to tea," said Joanna. "What's the matter with Rita?"

"She's not a fit woman for you to associate with," said Cousin Ben.

"Why not?"

"Never mind why not."

"But I do mind why not. What's wrong with her?"

"*Prenez garde, les domestiques,*" said Mrs. Winter quickly,

as the parlourmaid came in to clear the plates. We all waited, fidgeting, until the apple-tart had been served and the plates passed.

"Now," said Joanna, "what's the matter with Rita?"

"Joanna, dear, I don't think we need go into it," Mrs. Winter appealed, but Cousin Ben seemed to have other ideas.

"I'll tell you what's the matter with her, since you're so anxious to know," he shouted. "She's a thorough bad lot, like her crook of a father."

"I thought Mr. Carlill was such a friend of yours," said Joanna.

"I was fool enough to let myself be taken in by him, and a pretty penny it cost me."

"I never knew," said Joanna.

"There was no need for you to know."

"But I still don't see what that's got to do with Rita."

"She's exactly like him."

"Has she swindled you, too?" Joanna asked, impertinently.

"Joanna!" Mrs. Winter remonstrated.

"I'm not going to have a daughter of mine associating with people like that. Raffish, and . . . you probably don't know it, but, apart from everything else, Monty Carlill's been keeping a chorus girl for years."

"Good for him," Joanna put in.

"Takes her out with him everywhere," Cousin Ben went on. "And Rita goes with them. I saw the three of them lunching together only last week."

"Well, I go out with you and Thelma," said Joanna.

There was an appalling silence. I dared not look at anyone. Then I heard the sound of a chair being pushed back, and raised my eyes to see Joanna making for the door.

"Joanna, come back. Come back here and apologise," Cousin Ben shouted.

Joanna took no notice, but ran from the room. Her father started after her, but Mrs. Winter rose, too, catching him by the arm.

"Don't, Ben," she said. "Please don't. Let her go. Don't make a scene."

I heard the sound of Joanna rushing upstairs, and then the slamming of her bedroom door. Cousin Ben returned to the table. We finished the apple-tart in silence, without looking up from our plates. When the meal was over, Oliver and I went up to his bedroom. He walked to the window and stood looking out, for a long while. Then he turned.

"Well," he said, with an insincere little smile. "Quite like one of the old-fashioned repertory dramas, wasn't it. 'The rebellious daughter.' "

"What will happen?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It's funny it should all come about over Rita, when Joanna doesn't even like her," he said.

"Do you think we ought to go to Joanna?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Leave her alone," he said. "She'll get over it."

"And apologise?"

"I expect so."

"Do you think she ought to?"

"Ought?" He shrugged his shoulders again. "She oughtn't to have said what she did. And I believe in peace and quiet, especially in the home."

Presently we went down to tea, in the drawing-room. We were in the midst of it, when Joanna came in. Her eyes looked as if she had been weeping, but her face was calm and determined. She went to her stepmother.

"I'm sorry, Thelma, for what I said. It was rude and unkind." She turned to her father. "I apologise, Daddy." Cousin Ben took no notice. "But I shan't be

here on Friday night," she went on, addressing Mrs. Winter again.

"Darling, if your father and I don't want you to associate with Rita . . ."

"That's just the point," she said. "Not Rita. I don't give a damn about Rita. I'd just as soon not go. But I've said I will, and I'm going."

"There's no point in just being stubborn and obstinate about it," Mrs. Winter said.

"It's not stubbornness or obstinacy. It's a matter of principle. And if I let this chance go, I'll let them all go. I've got to make a stand, and this is it."

"If you go on Friday night, you don't come back here," said Cousin Ben.

"Then I don't come back here."

There was another silence.

"I'd like some tea," said Joanna.

Mrs. Winter passed it to her. She drank it slowly. Nobody spoke. When she had finished, she returned her cup and left the room. Oliver and I escaped as soon as we could, going back upstairs. Presently Joanna came in and sat on the bed, smoking a cigarette.

"Well, this is it," she said.

"They'll come round," said Oliver.

She shook her head.

"Yes, but I won't," she said. "Not this time."

"What will you do?" Oliver asked.

"What I've always meant to do. Go out first thing to-morrow morning and try and get myself a job. You don't feel like leaving, too, I suppose? Then we might take a flat together."

"I couldn't leave now," Oliver answered. "I couldn't leave Daddy alone."

"He wouldn't be alone. He's got *her*."

Oliver shook his head.

"Besides, being in the office . . . it wouldn't do," he said.

"Well, I'll find something," said Joanna. "I'll probably sign up at one of the hospitals, and live in."

"You won't be able to stand it," said Oliver. "It's awful. Awful food . . ."

"Do me good," Joanna answered. "I'm getting fat. Anyway, I'll be doing something, instead of just eating my head off here at home."

"It's not going to be much fun here till Friday," Oliver remarked.

"I know. I've thought of that. I'd leave before, if I could, only I don't know where I'd go. I suppose I could go to a hotel, but it seems sort of silly and melodramatic. Besides, it would cost money, and I'm going to need every penny now. No, I can stick it out, somehow, until Friday. Then, if I haven't found anything, perhaps I could ask Rita to put me up."

"Rita?" I repeated.

"Well, she's what started all this. I know she's only a symbol, and I never thought I'd have even that much use for her, but it just shows that you never can tell in this life. She might feel she owed me shelter for a night or two." She turned to me. "You've been to her flat. Has she got a spare bed, or anything?"

"There's a sort of divan in the sitting-room," I said.

"That'd do. But perhaps I'll be working by then. I may not even be able to go to the theatre with her, after all." She put out her cigarette and stood up. "I think I'll go and start looking through my wardrobe. I know there's heaps of time, but I've got to do something for the rest of the evening. I might even start packing."

She went out. Oliver sat and fiddled with things on his desk.

"Do you despise me?" he asked suddenly, after a minute.

"What for?"

"Not going with her."

"Good gracious, no."

"I would, if there was anything I wanted to do. I wish there were." He looked down at the sharp, dagger-like paper-knife he was playing with. "I envy people like you and Joanna. You know what you want. I don't want anything."

I was suddenly very moved. I had never heard him speak like that before. I wished there were some way of showing my feelings. In books, men always put their hands on each others' shoulders when they felt about each other as I was feeling about Oliver, but for us the gesture would be ridiculous and impossible. I realised suddenly that he and I had never touched each other in our lives; we had never even shaken hands. I sat still and looked at the floor for what seemed a very long time.

"I should go home," I said at last.

Oliver nodded, without turning.

"All right," he said.

I went into the passage, stopped at Joanna's door and knocked.

"Who's there?" she called.

"Me. Edward," I answered.

She opened the door to me. The room was in disorder, with clothes lying across the bed and a suitcase standing open on the floor.

"I'm going home," I said. "Good luck."

Her face was smudged as though she had been weeping again. She looked at me for a moment, and then suddenly threw her arms around my neck, hugging me tightly. When she released me, her eyes were bright with tears, but she was smiling.

"Good luck," I said again, and went downstairs.

(2)

"Thanks for your letter," Bruce wrote to me. "I realise there wasn't much that you could tell. I'm sorry Rita didn't open up to you, but that, after all, is her affair —whom she tells and whom she doesn't. Your description of the afternoon was good. I knew she was playing around with fortune-tellers and such-like; it's part of her insecurity. So is her association with that Orme female. I never met her, and I haven't read anything she's written, but Rita told me they were planning this collaboration. I think she's counting on it quite a bit—and even if nothing comes of it, as I am pretty convinced that nothing will, it gives her something to do and think about. I gather that she's also championing a girl cousin of yours in a fight against parental tyranny. I take it that's the girl I met at your house, though I'm afraid I don't remember her, or anything about that evening, very clearly. I couldn't quite make out what this was all about, but it seems she's turned Rita into a symbol of female emancipation or the right to live one's own life, or something, and that has made Rita feel good, too—given her a sense of importance. And anything that will do that for her is all to the good, until things are settled about *us*.

"And that is going to take a little longer than I hoped it would. And *cost* me quite a bit more, too. Things have not been altogether easy here. In fact, they've been god-damned difficult, and I've been going through one hell of a time with Bernice. It's been like the first years of our marriage, and those weeks in London with Rita, all rolled into one, raised to the nth power and then rewritten by Strindberg. Recriminations, and vituperation, threats of suicide, and even one last attempt to lure me back into bed with her and get herself pregnant again, that was half repulsive and half ludicrous. However, as of yesterday, it

looks a lot more hopeful, though as I say, it's going to be damned expensive. She insists on my making a settlement on the kids absolutely, as well as another on herself, which is going to leave me pretty stripped financially—and Rita won't be getting anything like the bargain that she thought she would, from that point of view. I've had to write and tell her so, and offer her the chance of backing out if she wants to, but I still think it's marriage that she's after, first and foremost. In which case, Bernice will go to Reno. That, in case you don't know, is in Nevada and the place for quick divorces. It only takes six weeks. Then I'll be free and ready to settle down to work and married life with Rita and the kids, and no more fireworks, ever again, please God.

"Talking of work—of which I haven't done a stroke—brings me to what you say about my book. Please don't worry about it. Rita did write me that you had not been too enthusiastic over it; I think she was sore that I had seemed to see more in your work than I had in hers. Those literary aspirations of hers are going to cause trouble, I'm afraid, but maybe marriage will take care of that. As for your not having liked my novel—or having found it hard to read—I most certainly don't blame you. I doubt if I could read it myself, if I hadn't written it. As I told you, it's a bad book, but I had some things to say, and my only regret is that I'm afraid I said them so clumsily and at such length that most people were never able to find them. However, so few people read the book that I dare say it won't matter if I say them again in another one. Most writers have only one thing to say, anyway. And as I told you before, too, I'm going to make myself a good novelist before I die.

"Thanks for going to see Rita for me. You needn't do it again, if you don't want to. Either this is the end for her and me, or I'll be back again for keeps, before too

long. And right at the moment, I'm so god-damned tired that I don't care which happens."

That was the end of the letter. Three months later I received a brief note, telling me that he was sailing the next week, and that he and Rita would be married very shortly after. I had lunch with them a few days after his arrival. The ravaged look on his face seemed to have become intensified, and there was something strained and a little feverish about Rita's gaiety. Several times during the meal her hand sought his above the table and held it ostentatiously. Once he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. Conversation between us was sputtering and awkward with the pretence, for Rita's benefit, that I had not known about their situation from the beginning. I had to pretend that it was all a great surprise to me.

Rita asked me if I had seen Joanna, who had started her nurse's training now at Guy's Hospital. She appeared to have seen quite a lot of Rita in the interval. Bruce had met her the preceding day.

"I really did set off quite an explosion when I asked her to go to the theatre with me that time," Rita said. "It's left me feeling rather responsible for her. She's an odd girl. Nursing seems such a strange thing to take up. But if it hadn't been that, it would have been Settlement work in the slums. She did talk about that. I suppose it's all a kind of substitute with her."

"A substitute for what?" Bruce asked.

"Well, for romance. A romance of her own." Rita answered.

"Hasn't she had any?"

"Not as far as I know," I put in, and began to explain my theory that sex, with Joanna, would be a cold-blooded and deliberate thing, like an experiment in a laboratory.

Bruce shook his head.

"You've got her all wrong," he said. "Oh, I know you both have known her all your lives, and I've only set eyes on her twice, but one of these days that girl is going to surprise you. Maybe herself, too. Though I doubt it. I think she knows what she's capable of."

"You mean—you can imagine her being . . . well, swept off her feet?" I asked, incredulously.

"Sure. And sweeping some guy off his feet, if she really went for him. Don't you go making the mistake that the easy 'lay' is the passionate woman. The passionate woman is the one who keeps it stored up. But when the dam bursts . . . baby!" he said.

"What rubbish," Rita said. "You don't know what you're talking about."

There was a sudden anger in her tone that startled me. It occurred to me that she might have thought that he was referring to her when he spoke of an easy 'lay'. Even as he had said it, I had been reminded of the swiftness of their own intimacy, and had wondered whether he were being altogether tactful.

"Ask for the bill," Rita said to him, sharply, now.

"What's the hurry?" he enquired. "I want another chartreuse."

"There isn't time," she answered. "We've got a lot to do this afternoon." She turned to me. "You wouldn't believe the things there are," she said. "The shopping, alone! Did you see this?" She extended her right wrist, showing me a bracelet of transparent rose-coloured stones in an antique setting. "Bruce bought me that this morning. They're tourmalines," she said.

The next day there was an announcement of their engagement in *The Times*, which my mother read at breakfast.

"Did you know about this, Edward?" she asked. "When was all this settled?"

"Oh, in the last couple of months," I said, evasively.

"What's happened to his wife and children?"

"He and his wife have been divorced. The children are coming over later in the summer."

"Did his wife divorce him on Rita's account, do you know?"

I wished that she would not pursue this.

"Yes, I think so. In a way," I said. "I don't think it's quite the same in America."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't think there has got to be adultery under American law," I said. "As a ground, I mean."

My mother looked at me, and I saw her decide to drop the subject. Perversely then I found myself wanting to continue with it, to clear up the impression which I knew she had formed of the relationship. But I knew, too, that it was an accurate one, and unfavourable, and that nothing I could say would be able to dispel it. Seen through her eyes, the whole affair seemed cheap and meretricious once again, and I found myself feeling oddly frightened, as though I had become involved with a group of shady characters to the point where I could neither defend nor disclaim them. I glanced covertly at my mother and saw that she was looking at me. I knew that she knew what I was thinking.

Two days before the wedding Rita gave a party in Louise Orme's studio, to which she invited almost everyone she knew. The older generation was cleared off at a tea party on the afternoon before: my mother, Lily and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Carlill. The Winters declined their invitation. At the evening party, Mr. Carlill brought his chorus girl, who was no longer very young. She was dressed in pale grey chiffon, demure and well-behaved. Only Joanna was absent. Her hours at Guy's made it impossible for her to attend. I had tea with

her that afternoon at an Express Dairy near the hospital, during her brief time off.

"You know, I've got quite fond of Rita," she remarked. "I know she's bogus in a lot of ways, but she has been kind to me. Very kind. That means a lot more than I ever realised until I got out on my own, and I'm ashamed now of the way I used to talk about her."

I stared at this newly mellowed version of the Joanna that I used to know, rough and uncompromising, and I thought of the things that Bruce had said about her.

"I'd like to be coming to-night," she went on, wistfully. "A good party would be a nice change. *Any* party would be a nice change. Even going home to dinner makes a change."

Joanna had made it up with her father and her step-mother, but she had refused their entreaties to give up all this nursing nonsense and return home. The work, the hours and the living conditions were strenuous and exacting, but her freedom had been too hard-won for her to go back on it.

"I don't do a damned thing yet that a scullery maid couldn't do," she said, "and there are nights when I think of my bedroom at home with a fire in it, or of having dinner in the dining-room, decently served and cooked, and I could almost cry. But then I remember sitting about in the drawing-room afterwards, listening to Thelma talking about prices and servants while Daddy goes to sleep, and Oliver sits and looks miserable, if he's there—and I thank God I'm where I am. And at least I can make a bed now, which I never could before. It's not much of an achievement for twenty years of living, but it's about the only practical one I've got."

I went to the party in a state of high anticipation. It was a very gay one, of the kind that I had always read about and longed to attend. Louise Orme had asked some

people, too, and I knew quite a few of them by sight from the theatre. A young man sang folk-songs, accompanying himself on the guitar; a well-known impersonator did imitations; the studio-room was lit mostly by candlelight, and almost everyone sat on the floor. Rita, her eyes very bright and sparkling, was wearing a period dress of flowered chintz, with wide, flowing skirts, and a rope of pearls was twisted in her hair. She was very busy, moving among the guests, chattering and laughing loudly. Lulu, swathed in a silver Indian shawl, sat on a kind of throne chair, with a semicircle ranged like oriental courtiers at her feet. Oliver was among them. A new novel by her had just appeared, with very favourable notices, and she was entertaining her listeners now with stories of the publishers' parties, teas and literary lunches which had been given in her honour, making fun of all the prominent people who had been connected with them, and giving imitations of them. She saw me standing on the fringe of the group, listening. She did not recognise me, but motioned me to join it.

"Sit down, young man," she cried. "Sit down and join the merry throng. There's no charge for admission."

I sat on the floor among the others, until I felt my hand being furtively touched and then pressed by a young man seated beside me. I shifted my position, and presently saw him move and reach towards Oliver's hand instead. After a moment Oliver rose quickly, and I joined him at the drink-table.

"What an awful party," he said.

"Oh, I don't know. I think it's rather fun."

"That kind of thing?" He pointed to the hand-holding young man.

"No, not that. But the other people, and the party. It's fun."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I admit that there is a certain degree of macabre entertainment to be derived from listening to that grotesque creature trying to convince herself and everyone else that she isn't thrilled to death with her success, but I'd hardly call it fun. I was just wondering how soon I could decently make my escape."

This was Oliver in his old mood. It was hard to remember him as I had seen him in his own room on the afternoon of Joanna's decision to leave home.

I turned away from him, fretfully. I did not want the party spoiled for me. But as I moved from group to group, hovering on their edges or trying to insinuate myself into their conversations, I grew less and less at ease. These were all people who had done things, or who were on their way to doing them. Some of them asked me what I did. I had to tell them that I was a lawyer, or that I was studying to be one. I added that I wrote, too, and then came the inevitable question—what had I written? I saw the interest fade from their eyes at my answer; they had met too many young lawyers who were trying to write plays. Finally, I detached myself from them, and stood alone, watching the party, watching all these people of whom I so desperately wanted to be one.

A voice broke into my dream of longing.

"You look exactly like a kid staring into the window of a candy-store." It was Bruce. "What's the matter?" he went on. "Lost your nickel? You look just as if you had. Point out what you want," he said laughingly, "and Poppa'll buy it for you."

I tried to laugh, too, to laugh at myself, and at the same time to communicate to him something of the fierce longing that possessed me, my envy of these people and the need I felt to belong among them.

"For Christ's sake, what do you want to belong among *them*, for? This bunch of second-rate phoneys?"

"They're people who matter," I said.

"That's what they're trying to convince themselves," he answered. "With their little ambitions and their little bits of names. Take a look at them, will you? They're the counterpart of every gang at every studio party I've been to in Chicago and New York since I was twenty. The Little Theatre gang—the hangers-on—the sneering, unsuccessful highbrows, and the crowd that will sit at the feet of anyone who's published one book or had one play produced, so that they can rush off, feeling that they've met a celebrity, and that that's brought them one step nearer being what they want to be themselves. There isn't one real person in the god-damned bunch. There isn't one real thing about them. Even the screwing's phoney. They don't really like it. I've done enough of it. I know."

I was puzzled for a moment, and then remembered the American word for sex that I had heard him use before.

"Go out and get yourself an honest whore, or else go home and write a decent book about something that you know and believe in. Or *read* a decent book, or listen to some music, or pick one decent honest person whom you like for what they are, instead of frittering away your time on all this trumpery and thinking that it matters, or you'll end up being like the rest of them. God, what a crew!"

I stared at him in bewilderment.

"Come and have a drink," he said.

I followed him to the drink-table, where he poured two tumblers half full of whisky, handing one to me.

"That's too much," I protested.

He used a rough monosyllable.

"Drink it," he commanded. "It's better than anything this room has got to offer. You don't drink enough. I've always told you that."

It seemed to me that there was a sharper and more personal note in his voice than I had ever heard before. His tone was harsh and angry. I had not been alone with him since his arrival, and I wondered now if I had done anything to annoy him.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked, timidly.

"Nothing that a few stiff drinks won't take care of," he answered, taking a long swallow from his glass.

"*I* haven't done anything wrong?"

"You? Only by talking the crap you were just now. Why?"

"You seem upset about something," I said. And then: "Is everything all right? About you and Rita, I mean?" I ventured.

"What about me and Rita?" he asked sharply.

"About your getting married?"

"Sure. We're getting married the day after tomorrow."

"Yes, I know," I said. "But . . ."

"But what?"

I could not answer. I realised that what I wanted to say was: "But do you really want to?", and I could not say it. I kept silent, sipping at the fiery drink that he had made for me.

"Look, fellow," he said. "You ask too many questions. And you want to know too much. I committed myself to something when I was here six months ago, or I was committed to it from the beginning by my childhood or the way that I was raised. It's just as simple as all that. And it'll work out swell. Things always do, if you know what you're doing, and why you're doing it."

"You could still back out of it." I was astonished to hear myself say that. The words seemed to have spoken themselves.

"Who the hell says I want to back out?" His voice was

really angry now. "And, anyway, what makes you think I could? If you think you'd have the guts to back out of something that you'd got yourself as far into as I am in this, then you're a hell of a lot more of a guy than I've ever thought you. What do you know about it all, anyway?"

It was as if he had slapped me in the face.

"I only know what you've told me," I faltered. "And what you wrote me."

"Baby, if I could have written anything that was halfway near the truth of this whole situation, I'd be the goddamned best novelist this world has ever seen," he said. "Proust would have nothing on me."

He glanced at me.

"Don't look so tragic," he said. "It's not that serious. It'll be all right. Quit worrying about it. Or about me. And get yourself outside that drink, and have another." He emptied his own glass and filled another, and then turned, looking me straight in the face this time. His eyes were bloodshot, and there were strange red patches on the skin around the corners of his mouth, which was moist and slack. His eyes were hard and unsmiling.

"Tell me," he said, suddenly. "Is there anything funny about the *sound* of this party to you?"

I looked at him blankly.

"The sound of it?" I repeated.

"The noise it makes. Does it all sound to you as though it were going on behind a glass wall?"

"No, I don't think so," I replied.

"Do *I* sound that way to you?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"That's how I sound to myself. Am I making sense to you?"

"Yes, I think so," I answered, puzzledly.

"I feel as if I were talking from underneath about six layers of blanket, and hearing everything from under-

neath it, too. And don't tell me that I'm drunk," he added, angrily and quickly. "Because I'm not."

"What are you two talking about so seriously?" Rita's voice came from behind us. She pushed herself between us, linking her arms with ours.

"Edward was saying what a good party this is," Bruce answered.

"It is, isn't it?" She turned glowingly to me. "I've always wanted to give one really good party. This is it. This is my swan-song." She took the glass from Bruce's hand. "Put that down, darling," she said. "There are some people that I want you to talk to."

He retrieved the glass from her, and drained it before he set it down. She straightened his tie for him, and put her hand to his hair to push a straggling piece back into place.

"Darling, how hot you are," she said. "You're not ill, are you?"

"Ill? Do you mean 'sick'? No, of course I'm not."

"You didn't catch cold in all that rain last night, did you?" she asked. Then she turned to me. "This mad man would insist on going for a walk last night in all that pouring rain," she explained. "Until nearly four in the morning."

"Whatever for?" I asked.

"I've no idea," she smiled. "The eccentricity of genius, I suppose. Because he really is a genius, aren't you, darling?" she asked him.

"I hope so," Bruce answered, smiling back at her. "It will be too bad for you if I'm not, the way you're banking on it."

She laughed at this, but with embarrassment.

"Come along," she said to him. "We mustn't stand here talking."

I watched her lead him away, and took another sip of

my drink. Then I put it down, shuddering. I felt lonely, and unhappy and disturbed. It seemed to me that I had caught a glimpse of tragedy. That walk of Bruce's in the rain, what had it signified? A struggle with himself, a last attempt to muster up the courage not to go through with his marriage to Rita? I was certain now that he did not want to. And I suspected that she knew it, too. And if that were the case, then she must be unhappy, also. I watched her playing hostess at the other side of the room, her arm linked again in Bruce's, her eyes sparkling and her laughter ringing out loudly. Suddenly it struck me that perhaps her whole demeanour was not so much happy as defiant, and that it was a triumph that she was parading before these people, a triumph that she had won by the skin of her teeth, an achievement which she could hold up and measure beside their small successes and importances, and feel superior in so doing. For one tiny instant I saw her need of reassurance, her need to feel that she mattered among all these people, as something akin to my own. Then I dismissed the notion as fantastic.

I started to wander again. I looked for Oliver, and saw him seated on a couch with a tall red-bearded man in shabby tweeds. The man was talking hard, and Oliver was listening with an odd intensity that reminded me of a child listening to an adventure story. I hovered near them for a moment. Oliver glanced up at me, and then quickly back to the narrator, nodding to reassure him that he was paying attention. I was obviously not wanted. As I turned away again, I caught the word 'Jungle' and 'Indo-China' from the bearded man. I felt lonelier still.

Presently someone at the piano began to play sea-chanties and to sing. In a few moments a group had formed and was singing lustily. The studio rang with the refrain of 'The Fireship':

"She'd a dark and a rolling eye,
And her hair hung down in ringalets.
She was a nice girl, a decent girl,
But one of the rakish kind."

Even Bruce and Rita were joining in, their arms around each other. Bruce's mood had changed. He seemed gay and boisterous now, and gave me a sudden, jovial wink which, after our recent conversation, had in it the quality of a double betrayal, and the effect of deepening my sense of isolation so that his description of the noise of the party sounding as though it were coming from behind a glass wall seemed now to be true for me, too.

I stood on the fringe of the group, until Rita's sister, Rose saw me and moved to draw me into it, linking arms with me. I could not sing: I had never been able to: but I stood, humming under my breath, self-consciously, and staring at Bruce and Rita.

Chapter Ten

(1)

IT WAS LILY CARLILL, or Lily Beveridge as she now was, who telephoned late on the following afternoon to say that the wedding had to be postponed. My mother told me when I came home from the office. Bruce was very ill; he was running a temperature of a hundred and four; the doctor feared pneumonia, and he had been taken to a nursing home.

For three days I heard nothing. I telephoned Rita's flat several times, and the number did not answer. I called at the home and was informed that Mr. Markham was about the same. On the evening of the second day I telephoned to Lily's flat. A maid answered, and said that the family were at dinner. I asked for news of Mr. Markham, and she said she thought that he was still quite ill. I wanted to telephone again after dinner, or to make another try at Rita's number, but my mother told me I should leave them alone.

"It isn't as if you could do any good," she said.

"I'd like to go and see him," I answered.

"If he's as ill as they said he was, if he's really got pneumonia, you won't be able to see him. No one will be able to."

"Why do you say 'if'?" I asked. "Don't you believe it?"

"I don't know," my mother answered. "I believe there's something wrong. Seriously wrong. But whether

it's pneumonia or not I've no idea. But in any case they won't let *you* see him, that I'm sure of."

"What do you mean by 'wrong'?" I demanded, angrily.

"What I say," she replied quietly.

"You mean you think he isn't ill at all, and that this is just an excuse to . . ." I hesitated. "To stop the marriage," I finished.

"I didn't say that," she answered. "Why, is that what you think?"

"No," I said hotly. "No, it isn't."

"Then what made you say it?"

"I don't know. I thought it was what was in your mind."

"Why should you have thought that?"

"Because of that other time," I said. "The time that Rita didn't come to dinner. Wasn't that what you were thinking of?"

"Partly," my mother answered. "And partly the way that *he* behaved that night."

"You've never forgiven him for that, have you?" I flung the accusation at her.

I've never *forgotten* it," she corrected me.

"You thought he was drunk, didn't you?" I cried. Well, he wasn't."

"How do you know?"

"Because I asked him, and he said he wasn't. He's never been drunk in his life. He drinks a lot, but he's never been drunk." I looked up suddenly with a new surmise. "You don't think that's what it is *now*, do you?" I asked.

"What?"

"Drink," I answered.

"*I don't know. It could be.* But whatever it is, there's nothing you can do about it, and I don't think

you should bother them. You'll hear soon enough."

I heard, two mornings later. My mother was reading the front page of *The Times* at breakfast, and I heard a sudden sharp intake of her breath. When I looked up, she was staring at me solemnly.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I'm afraid it's bad news," she said, gravely.

"Bruce?" She nodded seriously. "Not . . . dead?" My voice went high on the word.

"I'm afraid so," she answered.

"Can I see?" I reached my hand for the paper. She passed it to me.

"There," she said, marking the place with her thumb.

I read the brief announcement in the Deaths column.

"MARKHAM. On June 17th, in London, after a brief illness, Bruce Markham of Chicago, Ill., U.S.A., beloved fiancé of Rita Carlill of 28 Verrinder Gardens, South Kensington."

I stared at it, reading the words over and over again.

"Is that usual?" I asked, at length.

"What?"

" 'Beloved fiance.' Putting *her* name in?" I did not know why I asked that, nor why it seemed important to me.

"No, I don't think it is," Mother answered quietly, and then added: "Very."

I read the announcement once again, and then put down the paper. Neither of us spoke. I lifted my tea-cup, and suddenly I knew that I was going to cry. I left the table quickly, and ran upstairs to my own room, where I threw myself across my unmade bed. I did not know why I was crying. It would never have occurred to me that

Bruce's death could so affect me, but I could only think how fond of him I had been, and that now I would never see him again. He had been my only adult friend, the only friend who had treated me as an adult, the only friend I had ever made for myself, and now I had lost him. It was for myself that I was weeping, not for him. In those moments I did not think of him at all.

The tears did not last long. Presently, I washed my face and went back to the dining-room. My mother made no comment on what had happened.

"Let me give you some fresh tea," she said. "Yours will be cold by now."

She poured my half-empty cup into the slop-basin and refilled it from the tea-pot. I sipped at the hot tea in silence. After a long time, my mother spoke.

"I'd no idea you were as fond of him as that," she said. I made no reply. "Do you imagine . . ." she began, and then broke off.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing," she answered. "I was just wondering about the funeral, that's all. I must write to Rita. You must, too . . ."

I put down my cup.

"I must go," I said. "I shall be late for the office."

I bent over my mother and kissed her on the cheek, as I always did, by way of saying good-bye. Usually she accepted my kiss without response, but this morning she returned it, taking and holding my face in her hands for a moment. Then I left the house.

At the station I bought another copy of *The Times* for myself, and all the way to the City in the train I read and repeated the words of the announcement to myself. They had ceased already now to carry any personal significance for me, or to relate to the Bruce and Rita that I had known. Bruce Markham of Chicago, Ill., U.S.A., and

Rita Carlill of 28 Verrinder Gardens, South Kensington, were characters in a story, upon whom a momentary spotlight had been thrown, turning them into figures of drama, of increased stature, endowing them with a remote, impersonal dignity and importance. I found myself wanting to point out the paragraph to my neighbours in the train, and to tell them that I knew these people, Rita Carlill and her beloved fiancé, as though in doing so I myself could by reflection borrow a little of that new light in which they seemed to me to be outlined. At the office, I marked the paragraph in red, and left the paper lying on my desk in the hope that somebody would notice it and ask about it. One of the typists did so.

"Did you mark this?" she asked. "What for?"

"They're friends of mine," I answered.

"Oh, I'm sorry." I took pleasure in her slight embarrassment. "What was it he died of?"

"Pneumonia," I replied.

"Was she very much in love with him?"

"Yes, I think she was," I said.

"Poor thing."

"They were supposed to have been married last week," I continued.

"Oh, isn't that dreadful!"

I nodded.

"He was an author," I said. "He was my best friend."

"Oh, I am sorry," she repeated. "I had a friend who died once, too. A girl-friend. Of appendicitis. I couldn't believe it for ever so long."

It was hard for me to believe it about Bruce, too. I had known him less than a year, I realised, and he had been absent a great deal of that time. I could probably count our meetings on the fingers of both hands, if I tried, but I had come to think of him as a permanent figure in my life, as someone who believed in me, someone on whose

sympathy and interest I could always count. The very way in which his death had happened and in which I had learned of it seemed to make it more improbable; I felt as though he had vanished rather than that he had died. Alone in my room at the office, I tried to visualise him; first as I remembered him, and then in some disembodied or translated state in which he must be now. I saw him in the foyer of the theatre, leaning against the wall, smoking and looking bored, as Rita and I had seen him that evening; I saw him dancing with her at the night-club; I saw him as he had been in his suite at the Carlton when he told me that they were going to be married; and I saw him as I had last seen him, at the party, with his eyes hard and angry and his skin mottled, resentful of me and of my curiosity, and then giving me that broad and senseless wink across the piano. Where was he now? What had happened to him? Could he know that I was thinking of him? I spoke his name aloud, softly at first, and then more strongly, as though I were calling to him. "Bruce! Bruce!" I cried.

The office-boy put his head round the door.

"Were you calling?" he asked.

"No. No, I wasn't calling," I replied, uncomfortably.

"Oh, I thought I heard you," he said, and went away.

The spell was broken for me. I got out a sheet of paper and tried to start my letter to Rita. I did not know what to say. All my private knowledge of their relationship, which she did not know that I possessed, and all my doubts of Bruce's attitude towards their marriage kept getting in my way. I realised that no matter how she had felt about him, no matter how much she may have known of his reluctance, if indeed he had been reluctant, his death was a tragedy for her, and that it must have stricken her grievously. I tried to concentrate on that aspect of it, but a note of reservation kept creeping into the letter, and

I found that I could not write as though theirs had been a great love affair. I knew quite certainly now that it had not, and yet I knew that that was how I must write, if I wrote at all. I must close my mind to everything I knew or that I suspected, and write as though to the bride who had been robbed at the altar of her groom. And that I could do only by writing about Bruce, instead of about the two of them, as though it were a loving obituary notice that I was writing, concentrating solely on my affection and my admiration for him, and on what his loss would mean to me. Once I had embarked on this tack, I found my task quite easy, even enjoyable. I was quite proud of the letter that I posted at the end of the day, and I meant almost every word of it. The only touch of insincerity lay in my closing statement that I felt it was impertinent of me to write these things to her who must realise them so much more tragically than I, a mere friend, ever could.

And perhaps, I thought as I re-read the letter for the last time before putting it into its envelope, perhaps after all that might be true. What reason had I really to think that she had never fully appreciated him, that she had not really loved him, even if he had not really loved her? And perhaps, too, things had changed between them in those last days, of which I suddenly realised that I knew nothing. Perhaps a new understanding had been born between them, a new tenderness, in the realisation that he was dying. I began to picture deathbed scenes, last words, and Rita flinging herself across his lifeless body like the heroine at the end of an opera. Perhaps while he lay there in the nursing home some change had taken place in both of them, transfiguring them, purifying them, stripping them of everything but the real essence of their beings.

"Don't die. Don't leave me. Forgive me for

everything. I love you so," I heard Rita crying, and Bruce's voice answering: "I love you, too. Forgive me for ever having doubted it."

In the emotion of the scene as I pictured it, I lost all sight of its implausibility.

It was from Joanna that I learned the truth of those last days. She had gone to Rita's flat at lunch-time on the day following the party. Bruce had spent the night there, and was still in bed, restless and feverish, with Rita scolding at him. It was Joanna who took his temperature and sent for the doctor. It was she who summoned Lily and organised the telephoning to announce that the wedding would have to be postponed. She accompanied Bruce and Rita to the nursing home. Then she had had to go back to her own hospital. But from then on, Rita had clung to her. On the second day Bruce's temperature had mounted higher, and on the third day when she and Rita had gone to see him they had been denied admission. Bruce was in D.T.s.

"What?" I cried out, as she said this.

"D.T.s," she repeated. "Delirium Tremens. It happens in pneumonia, sometimes, with people who have always drunk a great deal."

I was aghast at this.

"But you don't mean . . . you don't mean . . . what *do* you mean?" I stammered.

"I mean that he was raving. Violent. They had to strap him down."

"Oh, no! No!" I cried out, in horror at the picture. "Did you see him?"

"No, of course not. Neither of us saw him. But I've seen other cases. I know what it's like."

"Do they really *see* things?" I asked her. "Snakes and animals, and things?"

"Yes, they do."

"Did Bruce?"

"I don't know. I imagine so."

"And you mean that's what he died of?"

"I mean that's *how* he died," she answered.

"Raving?" I repeated, still shrinking from the appalling imagery. She nodded. "Does Rita know that?" She nodded again. "How did she take it?"

"She went all to pieces. She's in the nursing home herself, at the present moment, under bromides. But she'll be all right in a few days."

Her tone seemed callous and professional to me, as though she had caught the hospital indifference to death and suffering.

"Lily and I had to do everything between us," she went on. "Make all the arrangements and everything. The last thing Rita did was to write the announcement for the papers. They're shipping the body back to America."

"To his wife?"

She nodded again.

"We had to cable her," she said.

"You don't mean it was drink that killed him?" I asked her. "He always said that people didn't drink enough."

She did not answer me.

"Tell me something," she said, suddenly. "Do you think Rita was in love with him?"

"I don't know," I answered, slowly. "Yes, I think she was, really."

"Was he in love with her?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I don't know," she said. "I suppose because I don't think he was."

"I don't, either," I confessed.

She stared ahead of her.

"You liked him, didn't you?" she said. "You were very fond of him?"

"Yes, very," I replied.

Again she was silent, and this time for a long while.

"I think I could have been," she said at last.

"You could have been what?"

"Fond of him," she answered. "I think I could have been in love with him."

"You? But you didn't know him, did you?"

"No, not really. I only saw him three times in all, apart from that last morning he was ill. But I still think I could have been in love with him. Don't ask me why. I don't know why. He was weak, and a drunk, and a failure, and I'm absolutely sure he never even noticed me, but I still think so. And I wish to goodness I could believe that he had been in love with Rita."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because then I wouldn't feel I might have stood a chance, if he had lived. Oh, I know I wouldn't, anyway, and that they'd have been married by now, and I'd have taken damned good care to stay out of their way. But I wouldn't be hating Rita as I am, if I'd thought he loved her or even wanted to marry her."

"Hating her? Last time you said that you were fond of her. That she had been so kind to you."

"I know I did. But I hadn't seen her, then, behaving as she did that morning. Nagging at him, and refusing to believe that he was ill, accusing him of shamming to get out of marrying her."

"Did she say that?" I asked.

"She said a lot more than that. And during those days at the nursing home, too. I don't ever want to see her again. I know that's silly of me, and I won't go on feeling like that. I ought to be sorry for her, I know. There's not much left for her, really, and she knows it. She knows he was her last chance. It's just that I can't stand seeing anyone give themselves away, quite so

completely. It isn't decent, somehow. And I suppose that's just what I'm doing myself now."

I put my hand on hers. She blinked away the tears that were in her eyes, and smiled at me uncertainly.

"And you're wrong about his never having noticed you," I said.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he did. We talked about you."

"When?"

"When I had lunch with him and Rita."

"What did he say?"

"He said he thought . . ." I stopped. It was hard to find the words in which I could say it to her. "He thought that you were capable of being very much in love."

She turned scarlet.

"What made him say that?" she asked.

"Oh, he wasn't talking about himself," I explained, hastily. "He didn't mean 'in love with *him*'. He just meant 'in love'."

"What on earth did he say that for?" she demanded.

"We were talking about types," I answered, lamely. I remembered the other things that he had said: that he could imagine her being swept off her feet, and sweeping some man off his feet, if she really went for him. I decided that it would not be kind to tell her that now.

There was a silence.

"I see," she said, at last. "Well, I suppose that's something. To have been thought of, even as a type." She began to pick up her belongings without looking at me. "Don't make a tragedy out of this," she said. "It isn't, by a long shot." She looked up. "Or perhaps it is, for *her*." She went on: "Perhaps you're right, and she did love him, really. As far as she's capable of loving anyone," she added. "But it's not a tragedy for *me*. And I can't think what made me tell you, even, except that I

haven't had any sleep for about four nights." She stood up. "I've got to get back to the hospital now," she said. "I'd as soon you didn't tell anyone what I've told you. Though I expect you'll tell Oliver."

"Not if you don't want me to," I said.

"You needn't promise," she answered, with a smile. "I know you tell each other everything. Or *you* tell *him* everything. But if you do tell him, you might say that I'd rather he didn't talk to me about it, that's all. And if you see Rita, keep your mouth shut about everything. I haven't told you anything, you understand? Not anything."

"I understand," I said.

(2)

I did not tell Oliver for quite a little while. At least, not for about three weeks, and that was still quite a long time for me to keep anything to myself. I would have liked to discuss Joanna's confession about Bruce with him, and the speculations that it had aroused in me as to whether anything might have happened between them, had he lived, and whether it would have been a good thing if it had, but I could not do so without revealing the remainder of her story, her description of Bruce's death, and I found that too painful, too disturbing, too discreditable, even, to Bruce's memory, to be able to talk about it yet. It had a nightmare quality from which I wanted to avert my own eyes for a while. I could not think of Bruce any more without a picture of those last hours or days cutting horribly across my memories of him, obliterating them in hideousness, and it was a picture which I could not bear the thought of anyone else sharing. At any rate, not yet.

Besides, Oliver was very occupied these days with a new friend that he had made. This was the red-bearded man to whom I had seen him listening so intently at the party. His name was Tim Brandt, and he was an archæologist and an explorer. I met him once—Oliver, I thought, took care that it should be once and not again —when the three of us had dinner together, and I did not like him very much. He showed no interest in me, treating me merely as an audience for what amounted practically to a monologue of his adventures, to which Oliver cued him relentlessly. He told these almost contemptuously: tales of getting lost in the jungle, being captured by brigands or tortured by Chinese bandits, tossing them into his conversation with a kind of nonchalance, together with a severed head lying by the roadside, and a woman whom he had seen torn to pieces by a tiger, while he demanded improbable, exotic drinks, like sake or pulque, from the puzzled waiter of the chophouse where we were eating. Oliver was very impressed with these stories, and supplemented them when we were alone with others of Brandt's childhood when he ran away to sea from his ancestral home —his father was a peer —to be thrashed and sexually assaulted by a brutal captain, of his adolescent days in mining camps and brothels in Alaska, and of his prodigious physical prowess with women in all parts of the world ever since. Oliver's narration of all this had a quality of pride and personal proprietorship about it that reminded me of the way he had once talked about Rita, and he managed, too, despite my dislike, to colour Brandt with something of the same glamour with which he had formerly invested her, hinting a comparison between the richness of Brandt's life and the sedentary lack of adventure in his own and mine. He attached himself to Brandt very firmly, and spent a lot of time in his company.

About two weeks after my interview with Joanna, I received a note from Rita.

DEAR EDWARD (she wrote):

That was a beautiful letter that you wrote me about Bruce. I did appreciate it, and your kind expression of sympathy. I would like it so much if you would come and see me one afternoon. I would like to talk about him to someone who was as fond of him as you were, and of whom he was as fond as he was of you.

Affectionately ever,

RITA CARLILL.

It was the last sentence, or, rather, the last half of it, which overcame my reluctance to see her. I arranged to go to tea on the following Saturday. On the morning of that day the post brought me a surprise: the acceptance of a short story which I had sent to one of the more intellectual weeklies. And to make the surprise even more delightful, the acceptance took the form of a printed proof of the story for correction and immediate return. I gloated over it all the morning, and it was only when I was setting out for Rita's that I realised the ironic coincidence of its having arrived that day. I wondered if I could show it to her. I had a feeling that this afternoon should be hers entirely, devoted only to herself and Bruce, but I put the proof in my pocket, just in case.

She was dressed in black: a black georgette blouse and a plain black skirt: and she looked pale and thin and ill. When she had closed the door, she turned to look at me; then, suddenly, to my astonishment, she put her arms round me and immediately began to cry. I felt her body shaking as she held me. She was still crying when she released me, the tears streaming down her face.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I didn't mean to do this. I thought I'd done all my crying."

It seemed as though she could not stop. She sat down on the hassock, turning herself away from me, and buried her face in her handkerchief, making little gasping noises. I sat on the couch, uncomfortably, casting quick glances at and away from her. Presently she got up, tucking the sodden handkerchief into the top of her skirt.

"I'm better now," she said. "I'll get the tea."

When she returned with it, she had recovered her composure. She sat beside me on the couch, and handed me my cup, pushing a plate of little cakes towards me. I offered them to her, and she shook her head.

"But, please, you have some," she said.

I took a cake, and nibbled at it.

"I didn't realise that seeing you would do that to me," she said. "But I'd been sitting here before you arrived, remembering that first afternoon you came, and how that was the first time *he* ever came here. And how much, really, you are part of all my early memories of him."

"I know," I answered.

"It's such a little time ago," she said. "And it seems so long already."

"Yes, I know," I repeated.

She stirred her tea-cup for a long time without speaking. It was as though there were something that she wanted to say or to ask, and could not bring herself to do so. When she did speak, it was in a very casual tone.

"Have you seen Oliver or Joanna lately?" she asked.

I knew then what she wanted to know: whether Joanna had told me anything about those last days. I was ready with my lie.

"I've seen Oliver," I answered.

"Not Joanna?" Her face gave nothing away.

"No, I've not seen her at all," I said. "Oh, just for a minute," I corrected myself, in the hope of making it sound more probable. "But not really. Have *you*?"

"No. No, she's left me quite alone. She was here the day after the party. The day that Bruce was taken ill. She helped me take him to the nursing home. But from the day he died I've not set eyes on her."

"I think she's very tied down at the hospital," I said.

"Yes, I know she is. But you *would* think . . ." she broke off. "I think perhaps you were right about Joanna. There *is* something hard about her. Something almost unfeeling. I tried to be kind to her, after she left home. I saw quite a lot of her then."

"Yes, I know," I answered. "She told me that, the day before your party. She said you had been very kind to her."

"It seems an odd way to repay it, to leave me alone now," she answered. "But people are like that. It was very sweet of *you* to come to-day. And that letter of yours. That's something that I'll keep always."

Her lips began to tremble again, and she fished for her handkerchief, dabbing her eyes with it once more.

"Bruce was such a wonderful person," she said. "I suppose he had faults, but if he did, they were faults of kindness." She began to cry again. "It seems such a waste," she said. "Such a wasted person. Such a wasted life. And nothing to show for it. If he'd lived, he could have done so much. I think I could have helped him, too. Now there's nothing. Nothing left of him, except his memory. You know, he believed in you a great deal. And in your work. That ought to be an inspiration to you."

"I hope it will," was all that I could say. I finished my tea with a gulp.

"Let me give you some more," she said, reaching for

my cup. "What are you doing these days? Are you writing anything?"

I heard my cue, and took it. I pulled the proof of my short story from my pocket.

"Would you like to read it?" I asked. "It isn't very long."

"Why don't you read it to me?" she said. "Read it to *him*, too."

"Him?"

"To Bruce. Read it to both of us. He'd have liked so much to know that you had had something accepted at last. Read it to us both."

I read the story in acute discomfort and embarrassment. When I had finished, she said very quietly: "Yes, I like it. It's a lot better than anything I've read of yours before. A lot better," she repeated.

It did not seem to me that the story was so much better than the others she had seen, but I made no comment. I put the proof back in my pocket.

"What about *you?*" I asked. "Are you writing?" She shook her head. "What about the play with Louise Orme?"

"I'm afraid Lulu's been much too successful with her novel to think about that any more. I haven't seen or heard from her for ages. Not since the party. Oh yes, she did come by one afternoon, just for a few minutes, and did nothing except talk about herself. I'm afraid that play is dead. Quite dead."

"You're still doing your dramatic criticism, aren't you?"

Again she shook her head.

"I gave up that job when I thought I was going to be married."

"Can't you get it back?"

"I'm afraid not. It's a job too many people want."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"I'm going to Italy in a week or two. With my father. I'll probably spend the summer there. Perhaps I shall be able to write something. I don't know. Then, when I come back, in the autumn, well, I shall just have to try and start again, that's all. There's a play agent whom I know who might give me some work, reading manuscripts for him. You must send him your next play, and say I introduced you. If I could get him enough clients, he might take me into his office."

Presently I rose to leave.

"I'm meeting Oliver for dinner," I said. "We're going to a theatre."

"What are you going to see?"

"I don't know," I answered. "We thought we'd just see what we could get in at. Oliver will never make plans ahead, or book seats for anything, and he won't stand in queues, either."

"Please give him my love," she said. "Tell him I hope I'll see him when I get back. And if you see Joanna," she added, "don't tell her what I said about her. About my being hurt with her, I mean. In fact, I'd just as soon you didn't even mention that you'd seen me."

"All right," I said. "I won't."

At the door, she held out her hand.

"It was nice of you to come," she said.

I shook hands with her, and went down the stairs.

(3)

Actually, it was still quite early, only six o'clock, and I had more than an hour to spare before meeting Oliver. I walked to the restaurant, trying to sort out my feelings. I had seen what had appeared at first to be a completely

new Rita, one whom I would have liked to have been able to think of as transformed by love and suffering, humbled and ennobled. But as I thought about her now it seemed to me that it was not a new Rita at all, but one who had always been there, insecure and frightened, behind the Rita I had previously known. All that she had done was to remove the mask, raising it again for a brief moment when she had spoken, with her old note of patronage, of my writing. I remembered Bruce's prophecy of what her life would be if she remained unmarried, and I thought that it was true, that she had foreshadowed it herself to me that afternoon, and that it was that which was frightening her, that picture of her empty future which had made her cry in fear and in self-pity.

Did that mean, then, that she had not cared for Bruce at all, except as the instrument of her deliverance? Had none of this afternoon's tears been for him, for the loss of him as a person whom she loved? I found that I could not believe that, either: that I could no more believe in her as completely insincere and selfish than I could believe in her as the transfigured Rita. The truth lay somewhere in between. I did not think she even knew it for herself. I did not think that she was consciously pretending, deliberately falsifying her picture of Bruce. If she was denying the memory of those last days, as it seemed to me that she had been, it was only because she had not realised their full significance, or because they seemed unimportant in comparison with her other memories of him. She was remembering only his gentleness, his wisdom and his kindness, and reproaching herself perhaps for not having fully valued or appreciated them until now. The little ceremony which she had made me perform, of reading my story aloud as though to the two of them, had embarrassed me; it had seemed to me a sentimental and self-conscious gesture of self-dramatisa-

tion on her part; but who was I to say that it had not been sincere, as sincere, at least, as my calling of his name aloud in the office had been for me?

And of Bruce himself, what was I to think? Which had he really been—the wonderful person Rita had proclaimed him, or the weak, drunken failure that Joanna had described, with whom she yet was aware that she could have been in love? The man who had seemed to me to know all the answers, to have weighed and been aware of every one of his own motives, or the self-deceiving alcoholic who took refuge from his own inadequacy behind the swaggering slogan that most people did not drink enough? In the weeks since his death, since I had learned the manner of it, he had become horrible to me. This afternoon at Rita's the old colours had started to creep back into my picture of him. The truth there, too, lay somewhere in the middle. It would take me a long time to find it, if I ever could; and until I had, I did not want to talk about him. I decided that I would not tell Oliver anything about it.

In any case, his mood when he arrived was not conducive to confidences. I told him I had been to tea with Rita.

"How very nasty for you," he said. "You do let yourself in for things, don't you? How was she?"

"Very unhappy," I answered.

"Yes, I should think she must be," he replied.

"She said she'd like to see you when she comes back. She's going to Italy next week with Mr. Carlill."

"Is the chorus girl going, too?" he asked.

"I don't know." I had wondered the same thing myself, but I resented his asking it.

"How long is she going for?"

"The whole summer, I think."

"Well, that makes a nice long time before I have

to start thinking up excuses for not seeing her."

"Don't you want to see her?"

"Not very much. No. I do my best to keep away from seeing people who are unhappy," he replied.

I took out a packet of cigarettes and offered him one.

"No, thanks," he said. "I've given up smoking."

"Since when?"

"The last two days. It was hurting my throat."

I left the packet on the table. A few moments later he reached towards it automatically, and then stopped himself.

"Damn," he said. "Do you mind putting that away?"

As I did so, he brought out from his pocket a small string of blue beads, with which he began playing.

"I dare say this looks silly," he said, "but it helps."

"What is it?"

"These are oriental conversation beads. I'll put them away, if it fidgets or embarrasses you."

"Where did you get them?"

"Brandt gave them to me. He broke himself of smoking, years ago, with one of these, he says."

"Have you seen him lately?"

"Yes, I had dinner with him and the Chinese girl he's sleeping with, the night before last. He's off on another of his trips next month. He's going to Tibet. He'll be away two years. He wants me to go with him."

"Are you going to?"

"Me?" he asked, derisively.

"Why don't you?"

"You know me," was his shrugging reply.

It seemed to me sometimes that Oliver's confession on the occasion of Joanna's leaving home disturbed him, that he regretted having made it, taken his defences down, and that, unable to deny or to retract it, he had decided to adopt it as a kind of banner, blazoned with the

motto: "No incentive, no ambition", waving it in my face from time to time.

He looked down at the string of beads that he was holding. "This is rather pretty, don't you think? There's quite a story attached to it, about the way he got it. Do you want to hear?"

"Of course."

He told it. It was quite a story.

"I don't suppose you believe it," he said, when he had finished.

"Of course I do," I lied.

"I didn't believe his stories myself at first," he said. "I used to try and trip him up, and make him contradict himself. He never did. But I don't blame you for thinking him a charlatan."

I began to expostulate.

"I never said——"

"No, of course you didn't. But I know that's what you think. I know you didn't like him. That's why I haven't suggested your meeting again. I'm seeing him and his girl after the theatre to-night, as a matter of fact."

"Where?"

"Oh, in a low pub he goes to. Not your kind of place at all." He gave me his sly, amused smile.

During dinner I told him about my story, and produced the proof from my pocket.

"Do you want me to read it now?" he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I don't care," I answered.

He glanced at his watch.

"I don't really think there's time, if we're going to get in anywhere," he said.

I picked the story up again.

"You can read it when it comes out," I said, as I replaced it.

The theatres were all full, except for seats that neither of us could afford. After we had tried half a dozen of them, it was almost nine o'clock.

"Well, what shall we do now?" he asked. "Would you like to walk for a bit?"

We were at the top of Shaftesbury Avenue, and we struck across into New Oxford Street and on into Bloomsbury. As the long twilight started to deepen, Oliver's mood began to change, and mine to change with it. I felt as if we were back in our childhood. Unthinkingly, I offered him a cigarette, and unthinkingly he took it. It was only after he had lighted it that I remembered the conversation beads, and I did not remind him of them. He began to ask questions about Rita, and what she was going to do with her life.

"Do you remember how glamorous and romantic you used to think her?" he asked.

"You did, too," I countered.

"Did I? Well, never as much as you. And I stopped thinking it long before you did."

"You used to say she was *un peu vite, tu sais*," I reminded him.

He winced slightly.

"You have a revolting memory," he said, with a wry smile. "Well, there's not much glamour or romance left about her now, is there, poor thing? Unless it's the romance of her broken love affair. Having her lover die on their wedding day, more or less. I suppose that might be considered romantic by some people."

"Not if they knew *how* he died," I answered.

And then, although I had not meant to do so, I told him the whole story. I told him about Joanna, too.

"Good God!" he said, after a stunned moment. "Well, I'll be damned. The things one doesn't know about people."

"Yes," I answered.

"Do you think Joanna really meant all that, or was it something she was just dressing up?" he asked.

"I'm quite sure she meant it," I replied. "Joanna never dresses things up."

"No, that's true," he admitted. "Well, well, well."

"Is that all you've got to say about it?"

"What more is there to say? I'm very sorry, of course. But she'll get over it. You don't think she's going to die of a broken heart, do you?"

"No, of course not. But I do think she's very unhappy about it. I think Joanna feels things quite a lot more than most people ever suspect. Than *I* ever suspected," I added. Then I told him Bruce's diagnosis of her. "I think, now, that it's true," I said.

"You think that he and she . . .? You think that something might have come of it?" he asked.

"Joanna would never have let anything come of it," I said. "Not once he and Rita were married. I'm quite sure of that."

"Well, then, she's been spared something, hasn't she? A great deal of unhappiness."

"I suppose she has," I answered. "Unless she'd rather have had that than nothing."

"There'll be other men," he said. "At least, I suppose there will. I don't know. I don't think I really know Joanna at all, actually."

"You must."

"No, why?"

"She's your own sister."

"What has that got to do with it?" he asked. "I sometimes wonder if anybody really knows anybody, for that matter," he added. "Of course, you authors have to pretend you do. But you can invent things. You can invent anything you like. Or leave out anything you like.

Anything that doesn't happen to fit in. If you were writing about Bruce, for instance, you'd have to leave his death out, wouldn't you, unless you meant to show from the beginning that that was the sort of chap he was?"

"What sort of chap?"

"The sort who'd drink himself to death."

"He didn't do that."

"Well, then, the sort who couldn't face life."

"I don't think it's as simple as that, either," I replied.

"Well, perhaps not, but in a book it would have to be, wouldn't it? Or wouldn't it? I'm only asking. I don't know. But the author has got to have a point of view, hasn't he? He's got to make up his mind about his characters."

"I suppose he has," I said, slowly. "But I think he's got to make up his mind about himself, first."

"Now what *do* you mean by that?" Oliver asked.

I was not quite certain what I meant by it. It had come as a surprise to me to hear myself making the pronouncement. It was something that I had not known until then that I thought. I tried to elaborate it.

"Well, he's got to be sure of his judgments," I said.

"Can one, ever?" Oliver enquired.

"I don't know," I answered. "But at least one can be sure, or *try* to be sure, that they are one's own, and that one really believes in them. Not take them second-hand."

"From other books, you mean?"

"Or other people. Take Rita, for example. I think I've always seen her through someone else's eyes, until to-day. First yours, then Bruce's. And, some of the time, through my mother's, and Joanna's, too. I think I've always judged by other people's standards. I've let *you* influence me quite a lot."

"Balls," said Oliver. Then he glanced at his watch. "I

shall have to leave you almost any minute," he said. "I've got to meet Brandt. Do you want to come, too?"

"No, I don't think so," I replied. "Thanks, all the same."

"Well, please yourself," said Oliver. "We may be going down to Limehouse, later on. This girl knows a man who runs an opium den down there."

"Does Brandt smoke opium?" I asked.

"He has smoked it."

"Have *you*?"

Oliver smiled.

"I've tried it, but it makes me sick," he said.

Quite suddenly I was almost sure that this was not true, and that he had never tried at all. But I could not be quite sure.

"I don't think I'll come to-night," I said.

"Well, please yourself," he said again. "There won't be many more opportunities."

"All the same, I don't think I will."

Oliver nodded.

"I didn't think you would," he said.

We parted at a Tube station. He was going one way, and I the other.

"Good-night," I said.

"Good-night," he answered. "See you soon."

* * * *

I saw him two days later. That was a long time ago now: more than thirty years. I have gone on seeing and hearing from him ever since. I had a letter from him yesterday. I am not suggesting when I end my voyage of discovery with our parting that night that that was the night when I grew up. Despite the conventions of fiction, I do not think it happens all at once. But at least that night I had realised something about myself and my

approach to life, and I think that that was when the growing-up began. I tried to explore the realisation and to act on it, to judge less and less by other people's standards. I am aware that I have never been able to stop doing so completely. Perhaps it is impossible. There are always someone else's standards, someone else's values; they are part of the fabric of life. But at least, from then on, I knew when I was doing it, most of the time. My story was published six weeks later. It brought me two letters from readers who had liked it. One of them was from a girl whom I met, and with whom I had my first serious love affair. I published other stories. Presently, I had a play produced. It was only after the first night was over and I had read the notices, which were flattering ones, that it occurred to me to wonder if Rita had been there. No one could tell me. I was surprised to find that it did not matter as I had thought it would. I had lost the desire to patronise or to impress her. The chain of incidents that would turn into an autobiography had already started, and the vicarious years were over. I had begun to live on my own.